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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. NUMBER 11

The Invisibility Affair

THRUSH's most baffling weapon threatens the safety of the world in this new spy thriller by Thomas Stratton.



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The Invisibility Affair

By Thomas Stratton

An Invisible Dirigible?

A dirigible doesn't seem like a very deadly weapon—not even an invisible one. Dirigibles aren't fast, they lack maneuverability, and they're too big to use for spying in secret installations.

So why had THRUSH gone to so much trouble to develop an invisible dirigible?

As Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin followed the almost completely hidden trail of THRUSH'S new weapon, they learned more and more of the insidious scheme in which the invisibility machine was to play the key role—and they came to realize that the entire world was in mortal danger!

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THE INVISIBILITY AFFAIR

The early spring mud that inevitably followed Wisconsin winters made the road as treacherous as the snow that had disappeared only last week. Deputy Sheriff Charlie Reed peered irritably at the curve that loomed ahead, dimly illuminated by his dirt-clouded headlights. He shook his head. On this kind of road you'd think people would have sense enough to slow down. They didn't though, and then there were phone calls to the police and deputy sheriffs dragged out on impossible back roads to make reports. Dammit, people should know better that to show off on this stuff, but he kid hadn't and so there had been two cars in opposite ditches a few miles down the road. That's what you get for passing out driver's licenses like stick candy, he thought righteously.

He shook his head again, sharply. Pay attention to the road, Charlie, or someone will be digging you out of the ditch. Do your wool-gathering on your own time.

Something flickered.

Charlie glanced up from the road, but could see nothing. A thick overcast hid the stars, the next house was out of sight around the curve, and his windshield was smeared. There was nothing in the headlights but the muddy road and the overgrown fencerows on each side.

It hadn't seemed like a flicker of light anyway. Just the opposite, maybe. But a flicker of darkness didn't make sense. He looked down at his dash lights to see if they were all on. They were.

Charlie slowed the car as he rounded the curve. A few hundred yards ahead of him he could now see lights, presumably from the old Adams place. Could some funny business be going on at the farmhouse? Not likely, but he didn't know much about this Morthley fellow who'd bought the place after old Bob Adams had died. That was silly, though. The flicker was probably something connected with his eyesight. If it happened again, he'd have a checkup. You can't work as a lawman with bad eyes.

Just the same, he kept part of his attention on the lights as he drew closer. Now he could make out one light on the first floor and a brighter one streaming from a basement window.

Everything flickered.

Charlie blinked violently and shook his head. Even though it was two in the morning, he wasn't tired, and he certainly couldn't get highway hypnosis on this rutted, curving back road. Must be the eyes. Better see about that checkup in the morning; this could be serious. He drove on, slowly, until he was almost abreast of the old two-story farmhouse.

Suddenly everything flickered and kept on flickering. His headlights, dash lights, the house, everything. It was as if the film in a movie projector had gotten out of sync.

Charlie slammed on the brakes, and the car skidded to a stop sideways in the road, facing the house. The flickering was faster now; he could barely make out the house, and his dash lights seemed to be fading. His heart accelerated with the flickering, but he felt frozen to the wheel. Then, without warning, the flickering stopped and the house was gone.

And the yard was gone.

Charlie's headlights shined dully through empty air. A hundred yards away they fell on a dilapidated barn, and just in front of the barn the ground fell away like a cliff. Charlie lifted himself slowly in the seat and craned his neck to see over the hood of the car. As far as he could see, there was nothing there. He was either hanging in midair or at the edge of a cliff, like the barn. Very slowly he rolled down the side window and peered out. The road was as solid and muddy as ever, but the ditch he had been facing wasn't there any more. Emboldened, he opened the door and looked behind the car. Solid road, soggy ditch, brush-filled fencerow. He closed the door.

Cramping the wheels tightly, he backed, careful to avoid the ditch on the still solid side of the road. As he backed the headlights swept from the barn toward what had been an orchard. It was gone, too. All he could see was the edge of tremendous hole, nearly a hundred yards in diameter.

With the car straightened out, he drove a few yards down the road, stopped the car, and got out, leaving the engine running. Carrying the powerful flashlight that was standard equipment on county patrol cars, he walked back toward the edge of the pit. He felt a little foolish as he loosened his .357 magnum revolver in its holster; whatever this was, it wasn't anything which could be shot. But the action made him feel better.

At the edge of the pit he stopped and shined his flashlight into the depths. The hole seemed perfectly circular; the ground sloped away evenly to the bottom, about fifty yards below him. It looked like a perfect hemisphere. The fact that there *was* a bottom cheered him; he'd been halfway expecting a bottomless pit. The ground at the bottom and sides of the pit seemed to be ordinary: topsoil and clay, going down to shale at the bottom. Across the pit he could make out a boulder in the pit wall; apparently it had been sliced in two. Stepping back, he located a piece of gravel and tossed it into the pit. It disappeared. Blinking, he squatted down, extended his hand toward the edge of the pit, thought better of the action, and straightened up again. He shined the flashlight around the area. Nothing but road, ditches, barn, fields, and pit. Finally he walked back to the patrol car, got out a flare, lit it, stuck it in the road near the pit's edge and got back in the car. He sat drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. Once he reached for the microphone under the dash, but stopped before picking it up. Nobody was going to believe this! If only someone else would come along to back up his story—but it wasn't likely, on this road at this time of night.

After a few minutes of soul-searching, he shrugged and reached for the microphone. His duty was to report; if Shorey didn't believe him, he could damn well come out and look for himself. Switching on the mike, he glanced in the rear-view mirror. The flare cast its glow on a muddy road with a soggy ditch on each side. Lights from the first floor and basement of the old Adams place streamed out on a muddy but otherwise solid-looking yard.

Hastily he replaced the mike, shifted into low gear, and gunned the accelerator. Twin gouts of mud fountained from beneath the rear wheels as the patrol car roared down the road, skidded around the next curve, and continued accelerating as Charlie slammed the shift lever into "drive."

Either he was going crazy or the rest of the world was, and he didn't much care for either possibility.

Chapter 1

"I Had Hoped It Was a Real Revolution"

In U.N.C.L.E. field headquarters in Cerro Bueno, the capital city of the Republic of San Sebastian, Napoleon Solo was reporting to Mr Waverly in New York.

"Your idea was correct," he said. "It's Thrush that is masterminding this revolution. The heroic and patriotic rebels are mostly a front; they're allowed to do some of the dying, but Thrush mercenaries are the backbone of the rebel forces, and the financing and leadership come from Thrush. The rebel leader, Ferdinand Pessina, seems to be a genuine patriot, but his staff is composed mostly of Thrush agents, and they make the decisions. Illya and I have discovered the method they're using to bring in arms, and we have their headquarters located. Once the U.N.C.L.E. group here stops the arms shipments, I think the local government can handle the rebels."

Mr Waverly sighed. "A good job, Mr Solo and Mr Kuryakin," he said, "but in a way, I'm disappointed."

"Disappointed? In what way, sir?"

"I had almost hoped it was a real revolution. El Presidente is not precisely an enlightened ruler, you know, and he is extremely unpopular in the eyes of much of the world. Just about everyone would be better off if there were a legitimate revolution, but since the choice seems to be between a dictatorship and Thrush, we really have very little option in the matter."

Waverly paused before he continued. "I hope you won't require too much rest after your recent adventures, Mr Solo..."

"From the tone of your voice, I suspect we won't," Napoleon said. "What did you have in mind, and can we take a bath and purchase some new clothes first?"

"Another new suit, Mr Solo? We've already overdrawn our clothing budget for the year."

"Yes sir. I'm afraid I wasn't exactly dressed for jungle travel when we spotted that Thrush courier and followed him to their headquarters. Besides, we both need baths. After several days in the jungle, our ability to operate secretly in confined quarters has been greatly impaired."

"Well, if you must, you must," Waverly paused thoughtfully. "You do seem to be caught in inappropriate garb rather often, however."

"Perhaps you could speak to Thrush about not being so unpredictable," Illya commented. "It would save a lot of wear and tear on our nerves as well as our clothes."

"I suppose you're right, Mr Kuryakin. I just want to make sure that my agents know that being part of a great international peacekeeping organization does not absolve them from paying attention to details. Quite the contrary. However, there should be no difficulty about appropriate attire for your next assignment. Something conservative and mid-western, I would suggest."

"Midwestern, sir?"

"Yes, southern Wisconsin to be precise, Mr Solo. Some weeks ago, one of our part-time agents there sent in a rather strange report. One night he saw-or thought he saw-an entire house disappear, leaving only a hole in the ground. It reappeared later and has not disappeared again to his knowledge.

"Then this morning, we received word that a Dr Willard Morthley has vanished. Our computer came up with an interesting correlation: the disappearing house has been Dr Morthley's residence for the past six months. Dr Morthley is a physicist of some repute. We have no idea what, if anything, he has been working on, but the coincidence is too much to ignore. The computer recommended sending you and Mr Kuryakin to look into matters."

"But why us? Why not someone in your Milwaukee or Chicago offices?"

"The computer indicated the possibility of Thrush activity, and you are our most experienced agents in the field of Thrush and unusual inventions. That's why I have made arrangements for you and Mr Kuryakin to take a chartered flight from Cerro Bueno to New Orleans this afternoon. After a good night's

rest, you can catch the six-thirty to Chicago. A full report of our knowledge of the situation to date will be waiting for you in New Orleans. I've arranged for a member of our Chicago headquarters to meet you at one of the oases on the Tri-State Tollway. He'll have the Wisconsin agent with him.'

"But how could you have made those arrangements already, sir?" Napoleon asked. "You hadn't heard from us for four days when you made them."

"I'm afraid it's one of my weaknesses, Mr Solo," Waverly replied. "Optimism. Over the years I have come to develop a certain, perhaps childlike, faith in your ability to come through when the chips are down. Don't spend too much time-or money-shopping for that suit."

* * *

Twenty-four hours later, Napoleon and Illya stood waiting at the auto rental desk in O'Hare International Airport near Chicago. Napoleon was eyeing the pert brunette bustling about behind the counter, getting the forms sorted and filled out. As she slid the final one across for Napoleon to sign, he smiled and asked, "In case we bring the car back after hours, could you suggest an appropriate spot for turning it over to you? Some quiet spot nearby, perhaps?"

"I'm sorry, but our airport offices never close, Mr Solo." She managed a regretful smile as she took the form from his hand and moved back quickly. Napoleon winced as Illya jabbed him sharply in the ribs with his elbow and started walking toward the door through which their rented car was waiting. Napoleon followed more leisurely, and Illya had the motor running and was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel of the car when he arrived.

"Really, Napoleon!" Illya said as Solo settled into the seat beside him.

Solo smiled, "After all, their motto says they try harder and one never knows..."

* * *

A twenty-minute drive along the Tri-State Tollway brought them to the Lake Forest Oasis. Carrying their briefcases, they walked slowly from the parking lot toward the glass front of the main building. The day was warm and muggy and the air-conditioning that greeted them as they stepped into the tiled entrance section was welcome. Next to the snack bar, two men were standing near the milk and ice cream vending machines. One wore a conservative business suit, while the other had matching dark olive trousers and open necked shirt with the letters WSD on the left sleeve. The man in the suit spotted Napoleon and Illya as they entered, spoke to his companion, and strode to meet them, extending his hand as he came.

"Mr Solo? Mr Kuryakin? I'm Russ Wolff of the Chicago office." He shook hands with them both, then turned to the other man. "This is Charlie Reed. He's a part-time agent for us and a deputy sheriff of Waukesha County, Wisconsin. His reports brought this matter to our attention"

Reed managed to look proud and embarrassed simultaneously. "I never thought I'd get to meet you two," he said. "I've heard a lot about you."

Napoleon smiled deprecatingly, while Illya merely nodded. "A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Reed."

Solo turned to Wolff. "Waukesha County? The reports we read came from, uh..."

"Mukwonago," Illya interjected helpfully.

Reed nodded. "Oh, yes. That's a town in the southern part of the county. I live there, and send my reports from home."

"Well, then," said Napoleon, "It seems we're bound for Mukwonago. Will you be coming with us, Mr Wolff?"

Wolff shook his head. "There's nothing I'd like better than to see how you two work, but I'm afraid I can't. We suspect Thrush of having its eye on the new atomic accelerator being planned at Weston, as well as infiltrating into the local civil rights movement and the local branch of the Nazi party, and our office is pretty well tied up. In fact, I'm on my way to Weston now. In any event, I probably know less about this than your do. Reed reports directly to New York, like all our part-time agents, and the request for the

meeting and what information I have come from the New York office." He sounded a bit resentful.

"Can we count on our Milwaukee branch for assistance?" Illya asked.

Wolff nodded. "Certainly, but remember that it's a small branch, and they're having their troubles, too."

"Oh?"

"They can tell you about it if you check in with them. I'm not sure they want it circulated. I'm not even sure I believe it."

Napoleon and Illya exchanged glances. Checking with Milwaukee would be a definite part of their program.

"Now, then," said Wolff, "I hate to rush this, but I do have to get to Weston. New York said that you had been flown here more or less directly from your last assignment, and you would need some replacement equipment. If you'll come with me to the car, I'll fix you up and then you and Mr. Reed can be on your way."

A few minutes later, their briefcases well supplied with assorted weapons and gadgetry, Napoleon and Illya watched the Chicago agent swing his car out of the parking lot and through the service area toward the tollway entrance ramp.

"Well, Mr Reed," said Napoleon, "suppose you tell us all about it on the way."

Reed looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, but I can't ride with you. I drove down in my patrol car, and I'd better have it back at the office by four o'clock, or the sheriff will be asking questions.

Illya frowned, "You mean he doesn't know you're down here to meet us?"

"Well, no," Reed said, looking intently at the left front tyre of the rented car. "And if you could do me a favor..."

"Of course, Mr Reed," Napoleon said. "After all, you are one of us."

Napoleon's intended reassurance seemed to make Reed even more uncomfortable. "Yes, well, thank you, but..." He hesitated, searching for

words, then blurted out, "Don't mention to the sheriff where you got the information. He doesn't know I report to you on the side, and, well, all in all he's pretty hardnosed about moonlighting."

Napoleon blinked. "I wouldn't consider working for U.N.C.L.E. as 'moonlighting,' Mr Reed."

"Now, Napoleon," Illya broke in, "you know that a good cover story is valuable in inverse proportion to the number of people who know about it." He turned to Reed. "Your secret is safe with us."

"Of course." Napoleon's cordial smile returned. "You can give us a quick rundown now, and we can arrange a meeting place for later conferences. We have transcripts of your reports, but a first-hand account is always more informative. Now, as I understand it, the problem is that a house disappeared briefly and then reappeared, and later the owner of this house disappeared and hasn't reappeared. We have a dossier on the owner, Dr Morthley. Brilliant man, though a little eccentric. Now then, if you could repeat in detail just what you saw and did that first night..."

"It was about two months ago," Reed began, and proceeded to give a vivid description of his encounter, apparently forgetting his four o'clock deadline with the patrol car. "I stopped by to talk to Dr Morthley the next day," he concluded. "You know, feel him out a bit. I must say, if he knew anything about it, he was a good actor. A lot of guys would try to bluff—you know, convince me that I hadn't really seen anything. That's when you know they're up to something. Morthley wasn't that way, though. He seemed quite concerned, but didn't have any explanation."

"Did he say whether or not he'd been working on an experiment that night?" Illya asked.

Reed grinned ruefully. "Yes. He did, but it was just a string of big words to me. Omnipercptual something—or was it omnidirectional? Something like that; I didn't understand any of it, and he said it couldn't have had anything to do with what I saw."

"And the Doctor himself disappeared yesterday?" asked Napoleon.

"Well, not exactly. I just found out about it yesterday. As near as I can tell, the last time anyone saw him was three days ago. There was two days' mail in his box; that's how I found out about it. The mail carrier on that route is my father-in-law."

"Do you always watch over the rural residents that closely?" Napoleon asked.

"No, but I've been trying to keep an eye on Dr Morthley ever since the house disappeared. Something was going on out there. So when he didn't pick up his mail, I checked on it."

"Are there any nearby neighbours?" Napoleon asked. "Anybody who might have seen anything suspicious?"

"No close ones, really. The house sits between two curves in the road. Nearest houses are a half mile away, and with the curve and trees—and a couple hills—I don't think anyone in them could see anything. Old Mrs Cartlin could probably see the place, though. She lives on another road, about a half mile away, but it's on a hill, and until the leaves are all back on the trees—"

"You haven't questioned her?"

"No. I didn't have any real reason to ask questions until he disappeared. No real reason now, for that matter. The sheriff says Morthley probably went on vacation, and as long as that's the official view I don't have any right to nose around. Besides, anything you say to Mrs Cartlin is common knowledge all over that end of the county in a couple of days."

"Could you show us around the area this evening?" Illya asked.

"And," added Napoleon, "could you give us a list of the people living about two miles in each direction, particularly those in the direction of the nearest highway?"

"And one other thing," said Illya. "Would you tell us how to get to Mukwonago?"

"I don't know about showing you around tonight," replied Reed. "I'm supposed to be on duty at the sheriff's office we've got a couple of men sick,

and everybody else is doubling up to handle the work. You could come up and see, though. That's in Waukesha, now, not Mukwonago. He rummaged in the glove compartment of the patrol car and handed them a map of Wisconsin. "I could get you the list of people by then, and maybe snow the sheriff into letting me off to guide you around. Make sure you don't tell him you know me, though."

"That sounds fine. We'll see you this evening, then." The two agents got into the car, Illya behind the wheel. Reed still stood near the left door, fidgeting. "Was there anything else?" asked Illya.

Reed looked as if he were about to blush. "There is one thing you could do for me, since it's getting so late; I won't have time to stop by my place before going to the office and..."

"Yes?" Illya said impatiently.

"Well, I have some"—Reed hesitated—"some margarine in the car. I picked up on the way down here, and I was going to leave it at my house before..."

Both agents looked blank. "Margarine?" they chorused.

"Yes, said Reed, fidgeting more intensely. "It's coloured margarine, and it's still illegal in Wisconsin. It's a dairy state and every year they try to get it made legal, but so far...Anyway, the only way to get it is to buy it in some other state and bring it back. Everybody does it, but with me being a law officer...Well, like I said, the sheriff is kind of hardnosed about a lot of things. There was some uproar a while back when one of the other deputies was caught with some margarine, and—" He broke off, with an elaborate shrug.

Illya kept his face deadpan more successfully than Napoleon, though he doubted that Reed could see either of them while staring nervously at the car's outside rear-view mirror. "I think we can manage, don't you, Napoleon? After all, if we can't get a case of coloured margarine through Wisconsin customs, we had better turn in our credentials. If we're caught, we can always say Thrush planted it in our trunk."

A few minutes later they were back on the Tri-State Tollway, heading for the Wisconsin line with twenty-four pounds of contraband margarine.

Chapter 2

"Would You Like to See My Binoculars?"

It was just after five when Illya angled the car into a parking space a half block past the Waukesha County Courthouse. Illya locked the car while Napoleon virtuously fed a nickel into the parking meter. After a few minutes' search through the rambling corridors of the building, they located the sheriff's office.

Behind a large desk with a line of books across its front sat a middle-aged man, a little overweight, with graying, slicked-down hair. He looked up from the papers on the desk and smiled cordially as the two agents stepped through the door. "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

Napoleon stepped to the desk. "Sheriff Shorey?"

The man nodded.

"I'm Napoleon Solo and this is Illya Kuryakin," Solo explained, producing his wallet with the gold identification card. "We're special agents for The United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, and we'd like to talk to you about the disappearance of Dr Morthley from Mukwonago a few days ago."

"Mr Solo and I just flew into O'Hare a few hours ago," Illya offered. "The New York office sent us as soon as word was received of Dr Morthley's disappearance."

"That's right," Napoleon said. "There's reason to believe that the disappearance of Dr Morthley could have serious international implications." He held out his hand for the wallet, which was dangling limply from Shorey's hand. "Could you or one of your men show us the house where he lived? We'd like to get at it as soon as we can. New York is anxious for a preliminary report."

Shorey, trying as best he could to cope with the incomprehensible handed the wallet back to Napoleon and attempted to look helpful.

"I could show them, Tom." Charlie Reed stepped into the office. "I've heard about their organization, though I can't imagine why they would be interested in Dr Morthley."

The sheriff seized the opportunity. "Fine, Charlie," he said heartily. "You show these gentlemen what they want to see. I'll stay at the desk until you get back. Anyway, McDermit called and said he might be able to come in tonight; he can take over for you if he does." He turned to the agents. "This is one of my deputies, Charlie Reed. He can show you around; he knows the area around there like the palm of his hand. Let's see, that was Solo and...?"

"Kuryakin," Illya answered. The agents solemnly shook hands with Reed for the third time that day.

"The patrol car is out in front, if you want to ride with me," Reed said.

Napoleon considered, then shook his head. "We'd better follow you in our car. We may want to look around after you've gone back on duty. I wouldn't want to cause any problems for the Waukesha County law enforcement." He smiled at the sheriff as the three men stepped out of the office. As they walked down the corridor, Illya felt sure he had heard a sigh of relief as the door had closed.

When they reached the sidewalk, Napoleon said, "You lead the way. We'll follow; we're parked down the street. We'll want to take a look at Dr Morthley's house first, then perhaps we can talk to the neighbours."

"Right. Here's the list of names you wanted. I'll drive past where you're parked and you can swing in behind me."

Twenty minutes later, Illya turned off a dusty country road into a rutted driveway behind Reed's car. They followed the drive around to the back of the house, where it stopped in front of an unpainted wooden structure that had apparently served as a garage for Dr Morthley. Through some trees on their right, they could see a large, sagging building badly in need of paint.

"It's a barn," Illya said, noticing Napoleon's glance at the structure.

The agents walked up to the back door of the house, where Reed was waiting.

"Did Dr Morthley have a car?" Illya asked.

Reed nodded. "Yes. It's gone; that's one of the reasons the sheriff thinks he went away by himself. But he'd have had his mail held, he was very particular about his mail."

"Now, you said there was a bright light in the basement the night the house disappeared," said Napoleon.

"Uh-huh." Reed pushed open the unlocked back door and stepped into a kitchen. He motioned toward a door on the far side of the room. "It's through there."

Napoleon opened the door and felt for a light switch. When he found it, light from the basement illuminated a landing where the stairs took a sharp turn. Solo ducked his head and led the way down.

At the foot of the stairs, he stepped out of Illya's way and looked around. To his right, two hot air ducts snaked through a wooden partition and disappeared into the ceiling. A vacant workbench with several electrical outlets stretched along the wall facing him, and what looked like a bin full of large chunks of scrap of metal filled one corner.

"What have we here?" Napoleon peered around behind the stairway into the other half of the basement. Lying near the far wall was a door; in the concrete wall itself a door frame was mounted, one side splintered and buckled.

Illya and Napoleon walked over to the door frame. Beyond the opening, a set of wooden steps led up to ground level outside the house. A half dozen two-by-fours lay on the steps, forming a crude ramp. The top of the stair was blocked by a single horizontal door, presumably mounted flush with the ground.

"Looks like something big was moved out through here," Napoleon observed, eyeing the splintered section of door frame.

Illya moved back into the basement. "Heavy, too," he said, gesturing at two deep gouges in the concrete floor.

Napoleon walked back toward the workbench. About ten feet from the bench, not far from the bin of scrap metal; he spotted four bolt holes in the floor.

Very big, judging from those," he murmured. "Find anything in there?" he asked Illya, who had begun poking through the scrap bin.

"No, not really," Illya said, picking up an oddly shaped piece of metal and turning it over in his hands. "Just lots of iron in strange shapes and some burnt-out electrical equipment. We'd better have some of the lab boys out here to look at it. They might be able to come up with something useful."

Napoleon turned to Reed. "You don't have any idea what Morthley had down here?"

"No, I never had any reason to go beyond the living room." Reed replied. "Dr Morthley was friendly enough, but he didn't talk about his work, and it wasn't really any of my business."

"Until now," Illya murmured.

"Was he friendly with anyone—friendly enough to drop hints about his work?" Napoleon asked.

"Not that I know of. Oh, he was friendly enough. He'd talk about crops, weather, politics, business, basketball—he was quite a basketball fan. Said once that he grew up in Indiana. But nothing about his work. He'd answer questions if you asked him, but his answers never seemed to give any information."

"We had better search the house, I suppose," Napoleon said, turning to Illya. "The Doctor doesn't seem the type to leave notes lying about, and I'm certain that Thrush isn't the type, but we can always hope."

* * *

As Napoleon had predicted, the search proved a failure. The sun was nearly down as they left the house. Napoleon pulled the list of neighbours from his pocket. "I see Mrs Cartlin's name leads all the rest; I believe you mentioned her this afternoon."

"Oh, yes." Reed walked to the side of the house next to the drive. He pointed almost directly across the road toward a grove of trees still visible in the fading light. "Her house is just on the other side of those trees. Go on down this road a quarter of a mile, then turn right. Mrs Cartlin's is the first house on the right. If you're going to talk to her tonight, you'd better do it fairly soon. She's nearly eighty and goes to bed pretty early." He looked at his watch. "I'd better be getting back; there doesn't seem to be much else I can show you tonight."

As Reed drove off, Illya made an annoyed gesture. "What's the matter?" Napoleon asked.

"We forgot to give him back his margarine."

Napoleon shrugged. "He probably wouldn't want to park it under the sheriff's nose, anyway." He joined Illya in the car. On the way to Mrs. Cartlin's, he unclipped his U.N.C.L.E. communicator from his pocket and contacted Waverly in New York, informing him of their progress and requesting that technicians be sent to the Morthley residence.

"So it appears to be somewhat more than coincidence, eh, Mr Solo?" Waverly said as the car pulled into Mrs Cartlin's driveway.

"Well, we haven't really learned much so far, sir, but something heavy was undoubtedly taken out of Dr Morthley's basement. The lab boys may come up with something there. Of course, we have no way of knowing who—oh, we're at the Cartlin house now. I'll check in again as soon as we learn anything definite. Solo out."

He slipped the miniature transceiver back into his jacket pocket and stepped out of the car to join Illya on the narrow gravel walk that led to the porch of the small, one story cottage. The front door swung open before Napoleon had a chance to knock. He stood with his fist upraised while a small crinkled face surrounded by grey-white hair peered up at him from a height of about four and a half feet.

"Hello there," the face said. "I've been waiting for you. Who are you, by the way?"

Napoleon slowly lowered his hand, smiling uncertainly. "We're special agents from U.N.C.L.E.—" he began.

"Oh, yes," the face said, breaking into a wide grin. "That's the outfit old Charlie Reed moonlights for. What's he been telling you now? I saw him out there pointing to my house a few minutes ago."

Even the normally imperturbable Illya looked a bit taken aback at this news. "You did?" he asked.

"Oh, my, yes," she informed them. "I've been watching you through my binoculars ever since you drove up to the old Adams place."

"Could we step inside a minute, Mrs Cartlin?" Napoleon pressed lightly against the partly open door.

"Oh, of course." Mrs. Cartlin stepped back and the door swung open, revealing a living room crammed to overflowing with spidery chairs, fragile little tables, and even more fragile bric-a-brac. "Would you like to see my binoculars? They're a very good set. It's getting a little dark to see very much though. I've been planning to get a good telescope, but all optical equipment seems priced very dear these days."

"No, thank you," Illya said, edging nervously into the room and barely avoiding a porcelain kangaroo with his elbow. "But we would like to talk to you about what you might have seen with them."

"Yes," agreed Napoleon. "We're investigating the disappearance of Dr Morthley, and we'd like to know if you've ever noticed anything unusual at his house, or if he's had any visitors in the past, oh, say three months."

"Why?" She folded her arms and rocked back on her heels, then leaned forward to Illya. "Was he a Thrush?"

"Not that we know of," Illya replied calmly, "but he might have been involved with some."

"Well, I wouldn't wonder," she replied vigorously. "That girl looked like a Thrush if I ever saw one! Bold as brass, she acted—"

"What girl?"

"Oh, there was a girl visiting Morthley almost every day for a while back in April. Haven't seen her lately, though. Not in the daytime, at least, and I can't see much at night. If I only had that telescope..."

"You don't happen to know who the girl was, do you?"

"Why, of course not! How could I know a thing like that?"

"I just thought..."

"But, I do have her license number if you'd like to see it." She turned and opened a drawer in a cluttered table near a window. Reaching inside, she pulled out a small red leather notebook with a tiny gold pen attached to it by a silver chain. "It was a 1966 Rambler Classic, four-door, light blue, license number W44-948. She was there first on..." Mrs Cartlin paused to flip a page: "...on April 17, stayed for about an hour, and came back the 19th for the whole day. She was there every day after that until the 28th; she was only there a few minutes that day." She snapped the book shut. "Hasn't been back since—during the day, at least. Did you get all that down, or should I run through it again?"

"I think we have it all. Thank you very much," said Napoleon. "You've been a great help, and now I think we'd better see about tracking down that license plate." The agents edged outside, Napoleon barely avoiding a jade axolotl on the way.

As they got in the car, Illya spoke. "Napoleon, do you suppose our budget would allow another part-time agent in this area?"

While Illya drove, Napoleon contacted Waverly and reported their encounter with Mrs Cartlin.

"I'll have the license number run through our data center and contact you as soon as we have anything," Waverly said. "And I'll check with our finance department about the budget for part-time agents. Until now, Wisconsin hasn't been what you could call a productive area for our organization, but in the present situation... Well, we'll see." He ceased transmitting, failing as usual to use the prescribed closing phrase.

Napoleon returned the transceiver to his inside pocket. "Shall we talk to any of the other people on the list, do you think?"

"We might as well do something while we're waiting for a reply on that license number. Unless you want to drive back to Waukesha and deliver Charlie's margarine."

Napoleon muttered something under his breath and studied the list. "Let's see, there's a house there, just past the next corner. According to the list, it belongs to a Mr. Brandondale. He—" The road was suddenly blocked by a dark sedan that shot out of the crossroad, swerved slightly toward them, and stopped in the middle of the crossing. Illya twisted the wheel sharply, and the rented car lurched as the left front wheel dropped into the ditch. The sound of metal scraping on gravel came from beneath the car and increased in volume as Illya jammed the accelerator down and aimed the car at the narrow gap between the steel fence posts that lined the road and the blocking car.

He didn't quite make it. The right fender smashed solidly into the left front of the other car, skidding it sideways against a sturdy metal post holding up a stop sign. "There goes our deposit," muttered Illya as the rear end of the rented car skidded violently through a section of wire fence, taking out one of the steel fence posts on the way.

Napoleon had grabbed for his gun when the other car appeared, but before he could use it, his head bounced off the windshield, leaving a network of hairline cracks in the glass. His vision blurred, his ears rang, and he discovered that shaking his head to clear it was a definite mistake. Looking up, he saw several identical blurred figures standing by the car door. Another painful shake of his head resolved the images into one large man in a dark suit, green shirt and orange tie, pointing an enormous old Mauser automatic pistol at Napoleon's head. A second later, the door was open and he had been plucked from his seat and deposited on his feet in the road. Staring at the shirt and tie hurt his eyes; he looked around for something less clashing.

"Step around to the front of the car, gentlemen. That's right; stand together where I can keep an eye on both of you."

The speaker was a young man, wearing a conservative suit and a bright shiny expression. Any Hollywood producer would have immediately cast

him as the Rising Young Executive. Only the Walther P-38 in his hand—a weapon basically similar to the U.N.C.L.E. Specials carried by Napoleon and Illya—seemed incongruous. He turned to the large man.

"Take a look at our car, Andy' I don't like the looks of that puddle under the radiator."

Andy, after a struggle, got the hood of the other car up, peered into the interior, and shook his head. "No good, boss. We ain't gonna run this heap till she sees a garage."

"Too bad. Well, take a look at the other car; perhaps we can commandeer it. Andy," he added in an aside to Napoleon and Illya, "has his faults, but he's the best mechanic I've ever met."

"One of his faults would seem to be an addiction to old gangster movies," said Napoleon. "I didn't know you could buy suits like that anymore."

After several minutes' effort, Andy announced that Solo's rented car was operable. "But she ain't gonna go far; I just hope she holds together till we get where we're goin'."

Under the direction of the smaller man, Andy produced a coil of rope from the defunct sedan and trussed up the two U.N.C.L.E. agents. After they had been thoroughly tied, the smaller man went through their pockets with brisk efficiency, removing weapons, communicators, and identification cards. His eyebrows raised as he glanced at the latter.

"Solo and Kuryakin, eh? This is interesting; we knew U.N.C.L.E. was sending agents to investigate, but we hadn't realized your organization considered the situation serious enough to call on the Dynamic Duo. If I'd known who it was, I'd have arranged a more ingenious trap. Still, simplicity has its advantages."

When he received no comment, he smiled. "Incidentally, my name is McNulty—Arpad McNulty, at your service. Now then, Andy, I think the best thing is for you to dump them in the trunk, where they'll be out of sight. And I suppose you had better gag them; I hate to hear grown men screaming for help."

"Right, boss," Andy replied. "Anyway, we'll need all the weight we can get on them back wheels to get outta that ditch."

The two agents were unceremoniously crammed into the trunk. Together, Andy and McNulty were able to force the trunk lid down.

Chapter 3

"Which One of Us Gets His Wrists Greased?"

To Solo and Illya, the next few minutes were torture. The lurching and bumping occasioned by the car's lengthy escape from the ditch made them both wonder how, as tightly packed as they were, they could bump into so many things. When the motion finally settled down, Napoleon's bound hands touched Illya's gag. He promptly went to work on it and soon had it off. Another lurch of the car and Napoleon became painfully aware that his head was against the spare tyre. After a minute of deliberate scraping, his gag was displaced enough to allow comprehensible speech. Attempts to free their hands weren't as successful; it seemed that Andy was an expert with ropes as well as cars.

"If we'd gotten rid of that blasted margarine," Illya grumbled, "we'd have a little more room back here..." His voice trailed off as his mental gears whirled. "Napoleon, can you squirm around enough to get your hands on that margarine?"

"Maybe, if you can manage to give me a couple more cubic feet to maneuver in. Why?"

"See if you can get an individual package out. Maybe together we can get it unwrapped, and..."

Napoleon grinned in the dark. "I see. Which one of us gets his wrists greased?"

With Illya crouched as far as possible into a corner of the trunk, Napoleon had room enough to unwrap himself from around the spare tyre. He butted his head against the back wall of the trunk, got his knees under him with his back braced against the trunk lid, then fell over on his side. With his back and bound hands toward the tyre and the margarine. The impact of the fall bounced the car on its springs, and the rough mat on the trunk floor ground into Napoleon's right ear. Straining his arms upward, he grasped the top edge of the carton, and pulled down and forward. The carton tilted,

scattering individual packages in all directions. Napoleon wrapped his fingers around one of the packages and managed to turn over to get his back to Illya. In coming down, he squashed at least one of the errant packages. The two agents ripped the package apart and Napoleon took one of the quarter-pound sticks. After a futile minute spent trying to unwrap it, he worked his hands around until they held the stick above Illya's bound wrists, and squeezed.

"You have never lived," he announced, "until you've squashed a quarter-pound stick of margarine in your bare hands." He smeared Illya's wrists and hands, not to mention his shirt, the ropes, and the trunk floor.

"Good," said Illya. "Now try to get a grip on the rope." Getting a hold on the greasy rope was no easy task, but after some minutes Illya's wrists slipped through the coils, leaving some skin behind. He immediately assaulted Napoleon's bonds and had just completed the last knot when the beeping of Napoleon's communicator reached them from the interior of the car.

"Solo here," they heard McNulty say in a passable imitation of Napoleon's voice. The voice of Mr Waverly was recognizable, but they were unable to make out any of the words. After a few seconds, McNulty said, "Thank you, sir. We'll get right over to talk to her. Solo out." Moments later he was speaking again, apparently into a Thrush communicator. "Her name is Kerry Griffin," he said, and gave an address in the 4,000 block of Farwell Street in Milwaukee. "You get out there and pick her up. We'll deliver these two."

"Mr Waverly must have given them the information we asked for about the girl. We'd better get out of here fast if we want to talk to her." Napoleon began squirming around in the trunk. "Let's see if we can unlatch the trunk from the inside. As I recall, this model is fairly easy to open." A minute later he muttered, "Well, in the daylight it looked easy."

The latch finally clicked back. "How's your good right arm, Illya?" Napoleon asked. "Are you up to pitching into a strong headwind?"

"Wait a second," Illya cautioned him. "I want to yank these wires and kill the tail-lights before that lid goes up."

The wires ripped loose and Napoleon eased the trunk lid open a crack. By now it was too dark to see much, but they could tell they were still on a secondary road; the tar surface whipped by inches from their faces.

"You hold the lid down to keep it from springing all the way up," Illya said after a few seconds, "and get a grip on me too. I don't want to get bounced out." He rolled up his coat and placed it across the sharp edge of the trunk, unwrapped several sticks of margarine and laid them on his stomach as he straightened out, face up, his feet touching the back of the trunk, his head and shoulders extending past the edge of the partially raised lid. Napoleon raised his legs and lowered them over Illya's, bracing his feet against the spare tyre. Locating the rest of the margarine, he began unwrapping it.

Illya picked up one of the margarine sticks from his stomach, squeezed it until it was good and soft, and hurled it over the top of the car. Picking up a second stick, he repeated the process. A splat and a sudden swerve of the car indicated that the second throw had been successful. He quickly hurled some more sticks, with Napoleon replenishing his supply as he needed it.

"I think that did it," Napoleon said. "They're slowing down. The moment they stop, we take them. I'll get the driver; you take the other one." Both agents armed themselves with as much margarine as they could conveniently hold.

Even before the car rocked to a complete stop, the two agents slithered out of the trunk, one on each side of the car. Almost in the same instant, both car doors opened and the Thrush agents leaped out. Napoleon and Illya launched themselves around the corners of the car, hurling the sticks of margarine as they came.

McNulty, gun ready, had whirled to face possible trouble from his passengers. Before he could fire, he got a partly melted ball of margarine in the eyes, and Illya was on top of him before he could see exactly what was going on. Andy, more intent on examining the substance which had mysteriously appeared on his windshield, took a margarine stick in the back of his head and then Napoleon was on him, thrusting a soggy mass of it into his face before he could turn. Blinded, the Thrush agents were no match for Solo and Kuryakin.

The two U.N.C.L.E. agents retrieved their guns and communicators from their captors. While Illya reached into the back seat of the car and picked up his briefcase, Napoleon called Mr Waverly.

"Yes, Mr Solo," came the voice from the tiny instrument. "You've been to see the girl already?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. That wasn't me you were talking to a few minutes ago; it was a Thrush agent who says his name is Arpad McNulty. You might send us a dossier on him. He's now our prisoner, but he relayed the girl's name and address to someone else, and Thrush agents are on their way to pick her up now. We're too far away; you'd better have someone from Milwaukee headquarters get to her house immediately."

"Very well, Mr Solo; hold on a minute."

Meanwhile, Illya had extracted a small spray hypodermic from the briefcase and was pressing it against the neck of each Thrush agent in turn. "That should hold them for a few hours," he said.

"Mr Solo," the communicator rang out. "The Milwaukee branch will have someone at the girl's home in five minutes. I told them to wait for you there."

Illya leaned over the communicator. "Have them bring some fresh clothes for both of us. Ours are turning yellow."

"Yellow, Mr Kuryakin? Some new Thrush device?"

"No sir," Napoleon replied. "We've been dealing intimately with some smuggled margarine."

"Well, well"—Mr Waverly sounded mildly impatient—"be sure to put it all in your report. At present, however, I believe you had best make for Miss Griffin's home at your best speed. I'll be waiting for another report from you after you have arrived."

Napoleon and Illya hauled the two unconscious Thrush agents into the trunk they had so recently vacated themselves. Napoleon pulled off Andy's jacket and started around to the front of the car. "See if you can at least get a couple of those wires connected," he suggested. "We're in no condition to

be picked up by the local gendarmes, with Thrush agents unconscious in the remains of a case of smuggled margarine. I'll clean off the windshield and try to find a map."

Minutes later, Illya slid into the seat beside Napoleon, who was studying a map spread across the steering wheel. "This won't be much good until we find a road sign." Napoleon said, handing the unfolded map to Illya and starting the engine. "We might as well go ahead; presumably they were taking us somewhere in Milwaukee anyway."

"Unless they're part of the Chicago satrapy," murmured Illya.

* * *

Almost an hour after they started, Napoleon and Illya pulled up in the 4,000 block of North Farwell. The proximity of Lake Michigan was making itself felt, for the temperature had drooped noticeably in the last few minutes, and the margarine had begun to stiffen on their clothes. They got out of the car and walked down the tree-lined street, watching for the address. It turned out to be a two-story building, apparently divided into upper and lower apartments. As they approached the front door, a man leaped from behind a large tree between the sidewalk and street. Leveling an automatic at them, he said, "Hold it! Where do you think you're going?"

A second man stepped from around the corner of the house and came forward. He pocketed his gun and started to frisk the two agents, but stopped after a second, a distasteful expression crossing his face. "It's okay, Sam," he said, reaching into his pocket for a handkerchief to wipe the margarine from his hands; "these are our men, the ones we brought the fresh clothes for."

"Does she know what's going on?" Napoleon asked.

"As much as we do, which isn't much. Mr Waverly just said we were to get to the girl before Thrush did, and bring some clothes for you. The clothes are inside. They ought to fit; Mr Waverly gave us your sizes. Funny thing—he didn't even have to look them up."

"Good," Napoleon said. "While Illya and I change, would one of you take our car—it's the one with the crumpled fender and the margarine on the windshield—and deliver it to your local headquarters? There are two Thrush agents sleeping in the trunk, and we should get them to a safe place before the drug wears off."

Illya and Napoleon walked to the house, opened the door and stepped into a small entryway. To the left a man and woman sat, ill at ease, in a small living room. As they rose Napoleon and Illya introduced themselves but avoided shaking hands.

"I'm Don Brattner, of the local U.N.C.L.E. headquarters," the man said. "This is Kerry Griffin. There's no one else in the house; she lives alone here." Napoleon studied the girl. She was tall, with a figure which was shown off spectacularly by the green knitted dress she wore. Her hair, a deep auburn, fell loosely almost to her shoulders. Green eyes studied the U.N.C.L.E. agents appraisingly. Napoleon was uncomfortably aware of his disheveled clothing, smudged face and margarine coating.

"How do you do, Miss Griffin?" he said, and turned to Brattner. "I understand there are fresh clothes for us here."

"Of course," the girl broke in. "The garments procured for your utilization have been given temporary storage space in the sleep module reserved for non-residents. Cleansing facilities are also available in an immediately adjacent area." She motioned toward a door halfway down the hall.

Napoleon blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Illya stated down the hall, gesturing for Napoleon to follow. "She said the clothes are in the guest bedroom and there's a bath next to it. Come on." Napoleon continued to watch Kerry until she nodded agreement to Illya's translation, then followed Illya to the sleep module.

They had just started to remove their greasy clothing when Brattner stepped into the room. "Didn't you say there were two Thrush agents in the trunk of your car?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Napoleon.

"Well, they're not there now. Smith checked the trunk before driving the car down to headquarters, and there was nobody in it."

Napoleon and Illya looked at one another. "The anesthetic must have worn off early," Napoleon said. "Are you sure you gave them both a full charge?"

Illya opened his briefcase, picked up the offending hypospray, and looked at it, frowning. "This isn't a standard unit," he remarked after a moment's inspection. "According to the label, it's loaded with something called M-27. Do you know anything about the powers of M-27, Napoleon?"

Solo shook his head. "I've never heard of it before. Evidently its powers don't include sustained unconsciousness, however. It must be something Chicago supplied; I don't think Thrush tampered with our briefcase. I'll ask Mr Waverly when I make the next report."

Illya shrugged. "There doesn't seem to be much we can do about the escape now. You might arrange to get the car back to the rental agency; considering what it's been through, you'd better assign your most diplomatic agent to the job."

"And have someone contact Charlie Reed," Napoleon added. "He's probably wondering what became of his margarine. Tell him it was destroyed in action, and we'll arrange for the Chicago branch to get him some more."

Brattner nodded and left the agents to their bath.

Returning to the living room several minutes later, Napoleon felt more assured in a clean white shirt and fresh suit. "Now we can get down to business, Miss Griffin," he said. "We understand that you were a frequent visitor at the home of Dr Morthley outside Mukwonago a few weeks ago."

"Not precisely a visitor, Mr Solo," she replied. "I was working for him."

"Working?" Napoleon sat down on a couch facing her.

"Yes. I'm a technical writer, and..." She paused, her face slightly flushed. "I must apologize for before. It's only that I'm so used to writing technical literature for government consumption. When I get flustered—and you people are enough to fluster anyone—I'm afraid I tend to lapse into rather

unfortunate forms of phraseology and terminology." She broke off again and smiled slightly. "Like that."

"That's quite all right," Napoleon reassured her, relieved to discover that she occasionally spoke English. "By the way, may I call you Kerry?"

"Please do," she replied. "I've always favored informal nomenclature whenever its use is practicable."

"You started to say you worked for Dr Morthley?" Illya asked patiently.

She looked up at him. "Yes. He needed someone to help him prepare a proposal to submit to the government. He thought he had a revolutionary discovery, but to properly develop the potential he need financial assistance."

"What kind of invention? And why do you say he thought he had a discovery?"

"Because its practicability was obviously negated by ..." She laughed suddenly and shook her head. Napoleon noticed that her hair whirled enticingly, not at all the way a technical writer's hair should act. "I mean, it just couldn't work. He said he had discovered a way to make thing invisible! Did you ever hear of anything so fantastic?"

The agents exchanged glances. "I'm afraid we have," Napoleon said. "What happened to the proposal? Did he submit it?"

"I assume that he did, although that assumption may not be one hundred percent reliable. I completed my assignment and he said he would submit the total package within a few days. That was in April."

"That would explain how Thrush found out about it," Illya commented. "We know they have a few people infiltrated into the government who report on any unusual proposals or patent applications."

"Yes," agreed Napoleon. "I have positive assurance that the U.S. Patent Office is riddled with card-carrying Thrushes. Incidentally"—he turned to Kerry—"how did Dr Morthley get in touch with you? Did he advertise for a technical writer, or what?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you? I'm his niece. He helped pay my college expenses—in the hope, I think, that I'd take all science courses and end up as his assistant. After I switched to writing, I helped him several times with his proposals. This was just the latest one."

"Do you recall any of the details of the proposal?" Napoleon asked.

"No, but I can show it to you; my part, at least." She rose and started down the hallway. "I keep a complete file of all my work—except classified jobs, of course. I'll get it for you."

Napoleon followed close on her heels. The door at the far end of the hall opened on a small office with a desk, filing cabinet, and an electric typewriter. She opened the top drawer of the cabinet, and searched briefly through the folders before she withdrew one and handed it to Solo.

"Even if Uncle Willard did have a practical invisibility machine, I doubt that this would tell you much," she said. "It's primarily a description of the device intended for laymen. The technical details and formulae were contained in a separate section which he supplied and which I never personally observed."

Napoleon opened the folder and glanced at the first page. "Yes, I see. I think Illya had better look at this." He led the way from the office to the living room and handed the folder to Illya. "What do you make of this?"

Illya scanned the title page, reading aloud. "Proposal for the Further Development and Refinement of the Omnidirectional Total Spectrum Molecular Interpenetration Device." He looked at the first page. "The basic function of the Omnidirectional Total Spectrum Molecular Interpenetration Device (OTSMID) is to establish an energy field, by means of which all matter within its range is caused to become possessed of certain qualities which make it possible for the entire spectrum of electromagnetic radiation to pass totally unimpeded through that matter. The precise manner in which this is accomplished is, at present, largely conjectural; however, it is to be assumed that some warping of the space-time continuum is involved. Experimental evidence produced to date would seem to support the theory that the field, in some still-to-be-defined but probably random manner minutely shifts the phase relationship between the matter within the field

and the matter external to the field. Gross phenomena, such as molecular vibrations in the sonic ranges are, insofar as our experiments have shown, unaffected by..." Illya broke off, nodding his head.

"It's a government proposal, all right," he said.

"I'm glad to hear it," Napoleon said, "but what does it say?"

Illya quickly skimmed through the first few pages, then looked up. "As Miss Griffin said earlier, it's a machine that makes things invisible. It apparently does this by setting up a field which renders everything within that field totally transparent."

Napoleon's eyebrows went up. "Hold it! I've read my share of science fiction. If someone is made totally transparent, he is also totally blind; the light rays pass right through his eyeballs instead of being picked up by them."

Illya winced slightly. "Well, that's a rough description, yes. Dr Morthley admits there are a few bugs to be ironed out. In fact, that is the primary reason for this proposal. He had the basic formula worked out for some sort of nullifier which would enable anyone inside the field to see other things inside the field though still unable to see out. But he needed money to build one."

"It still seems to leave something to be desired," Napoleon said. "It strikes me that it would be difficult to sneak up on someone if you have to feel your way all the time."

Illya shrugged. "Presumably if a device for seeing inside the field could be built, eventually it would be possible to design something to enable one to see out of the field. More time and money involved. An equally serious problem seems to be that the field is generated in a spherical pattern; not only would the man inside have to feel his way around, but he would always be dragging a small pit around with him as the ground under his feet became transparent."

"A pit? Remember Charlie Reed's description of the house? It had been replaced by a circular pit."

"Yes," Illya agreed. "There doesn't seem to be any doubt that Dr Morthley had a working model of his OTSMID, or that Thrush has it now. If they also have the formula for the nullifier they should have it built within a few days, although I admit I can't see any practical use for it once they get it built."

Napoleon turned to the girl, who had been listening admiringly to Illya's translation of the first pages of the proposal. "We had better take this with us, Kerry. Are there any other copies that you know of?"

"This is the fourth carbon. I left the original and the first three carbons with Dr Morthley. That should be all of them."

"Do you remember any details that might not be included in this, Miss Griffin?" asked Illya, holding up the proposal.

She stood up and walked lithely to Illya's side. "Informal nomenclature, please." She smiled. "Just Kerry." She took the proposal from his hand and flipped through the pages. After a minute she handed it back.

"Very little," she said. "I think he said it operated on dc. For his prototype, he mentioned using a number of auto storage batteries connected series-parallel."

Illya nodded. "One advantage for us, at least. It doesn't seem to be very easily portable. Thrush will have to use a truck to transport it, and not a small one if those gouges in Dr Morthley's floor are any indication. However, if they don't move it, we'll have a problem locating it." He turned to Brattner. "Do you have any idea of the location of Thrush's Milwaukee satrapy?"

Brattner shook his head. "We did have. In fact, we had the place bugged so well that we knew as much about local Thrush activity as they did. But when they brought in these new men, McNulty and Forbes, they evidently located our equipment and abandoned the place. We haven't found their new one yet."

Kerry had been looking at the U.N.C.L.E. agents in puzzlement. Finally she spoke up. "Tell me, Illya—just what is this Thrush that you're talking about?"

Illya smiled. "It's another acronym. Just as U.N.C.L.E. stands for United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, Thrush stands for Technological Hierarchy for the Removal of Undesirables and the Subjugation of Humanity. Sound rather like another government proposal, doesn't it. In simple terms, it's an organization which wants to rule the world and isn't fussy about the means it uses to get in power. Currently, its means include kidnapping your uncle and stealing his invisibility machine."

Napoleon nodded. "Tell me, Miss Griffin, would you be willing to help us recover your uncle and his machine? You would be in some danger, but then the mere fact that you are Dr Morthley's niece places you in danger."

Kerry looked dubious. "It's hard to believe that I'm in danger, but I do owe a lot to Uncle Willard. What do you want me to do?"

"Get captured." Napoleon smiled as Kerry's eyebrows rose. "You see, Thrush is already after you. We heard one of their agents giving orders to pick you up. Once they have you, they'll probably take you to their local headquarters, where they presumably have your uncle and his machine. We'll be following you, and once we've located their headquarters it will be a fairly simple matter to rescue both you and Dr Morthley. Actually, you won't be in any more danger that you are here. Less, really, since we'll be watching you all the time."

Kerry shivered slightly. "I suppose I might as well. But what happens if they grab me when you're not looking, or you lose them while you're pursuing them?"

"We have ways." Napoleon took a small pill bottle from his briefcase and held it up. 'you do have detectors for these?' he asked Brattner. When the latter nodded, he continued. "These look like ordinary aspirin, but they're not. After you're captured—or preferably just before you're captured, if you have time—swallow one of these. It's a tiny transmitter. It won't operate until it's swallowed and the normal acid in your stomach can act as an electrolyte for the battery. Then it will broadcast a single tone burst every few minutes; how often will depend on just how acid your stomach is. We'll leave a few of your Milwaukee agents outside; Thrush would get suspicious if we made your capture too easy. They should at least give you enough

warning to enable you to take the pill, but if not you can develop a headache after you're captured. Keep the pill bottle on you at all times."

Kerry nodded. "Where will you be?"

"We'll have to stay well out of sight, but we'll be in range of the transmitter. You can't follow a good agent too closely these days; there are too many ways of spotting followers. It's easier to let them think they're getting away with it. By the way, once you get to their headquarters, stick close to Dr Morthley. We won't have any way of locating him independently, and we may be in a hurry when we get you out."

Illya spoke to Brattner. "Leave about three agents around the house. Not your best men, incidentally."

Brattner erupted. "I've only got four agents! Two on days and two on nights, and all of us have been logging overtime trying to locate the new Thrush base. I'll call in the two night men, and that's all I can afford. The two outside are the day men, and they have to sleep sometime. Ever since they transferred all my best men to that San Sebastian fracas, I've been short-handed."

"All right." Napoleon spoke placatingly. "Make it two men. Instruct them to offer token resistance and then play dead, if possible. Thrush will be in too much of a hurry to inspect them closely—we hope. And I think the rest of us had better get a little rest. It isn't likely Thrush will strike tonight; they'll wait for us to drop our guard." He turned to Kerry. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, and I trust we'll meet again shortly, this time in company with your uncle."

Kerry smiled. "I hope so, too. Incidentally, Illya, I couldn't help wondering, the way you read that proposal. Were you ever a technical writer? So many men are incompetent in these things."

Illya looked enigmatic. "We Russians understand these things," he said.

Napoleon raised his eyebrows but said nothing as he and Brattner followed Illya outside.

Chapter 4

"I Never Realized Thrush Was Civic Minded"

Brattner took no chances on being tailed on the drive to Milwaukee U.N.C.L.E. headquarters. Napoleon noted with approval that the local agent had completely mastered the science of going through stoplights on the yellow "Caution" signal, leaving any followers with the choice of losing ground or conspicuously running a red light. Coupling this maneuver with occasional lightning swerves into alleys gave reasonable assurance that nobody was following them when Brattner turned the car into an alley just a few blocks from the downtown area. It was a dreary section, not far from one of the sprawling breweries that claimed to have made Milwaukee famous. The fronts of elderly stores in greater or lesser degrees of dilapidation lined one side of the street. On the other side, a number of freight cars sat in a rail terminal.

Brattner parked the car in a small open area at the rear of the alley. "This way, gentlemen," he said, stepping out of the car and leading the way to a dimly-lit door with a rusty-looking padlock above the knob. He fitted a key to the lock, explaining, "During the day, we could get in through the front, but the shop closes at nine o'clock and it's less conspicuous to use the back entrance."

The door creaked open. Stepping through, they found themselves in the rear of a long narrow shop. Light from the street filtered through the unwashed display window and revealed several shelves of records lining one wall. Near the front on the other side was a counter, and at the back, just to their right as they entered, were three listening booths.

Brattner secured the door, then turned to the middle and largest booth. "Just follow me," he said as he pulled open the door and stepped inside. A small but comfortable-looking chair faced the turntable and a pair of bulky hi-fi earphones lay back of the tone arm. Brattner lowered the blind on the door and turned to the turntable controls. He set the turntable speed at 78 rpm, picked up the tone arm, tilted it up and back until something clicked, then

gave the turntable a sharp spin backwards. The back wall of the booth slid smoothly up into the ceiling.

Brattner reached around the corner and flipped on a light, revealing a small reception room with a desk, typewriter, and small filing cabinet. He motioned Illya and Napoleon in, then followed. A pushbutton located under the light switch returned the booth wall to its former position. Illya glanced around the room and his eyes halted at the filing cabinet. A dozen hefty record albums were stacked on top of it. Peering at them more closely, Illya said, "Somebody here must like Wagner. I see you have at least two complete recordings of the Ring Cycle."

"Those are our cover," Brattner explained. "While the shop is open, we give one of these to any agent who has to leave through the booth. If anyone wonders why he's been in there so long, the Wagner explains it." He pushed open a door and motioned them into a narrow hallway. "There's nobody here but us, the day shift went off duty at six. Now, you need detectors for those transmitter pills. We have one of the standard models, and I think we still have one of the wrist models that only indicates direction. We're supposed to have two of the wrist models, but George's kids got into one of them. George is a good, dependable agent, but he will leave equipment lying around the house, and those kids of his..."

"I think we'll be all right," Napoleon said, opening his briefcase and rummaging through it. "The Chicago office provided the pills, so presumably they...hmm. Illya would you see if you have a detector in your briefcase?"

Illya's search was equally fruitless. "It would seem," he announced, "that we are destined to get by with one standard and one wrist detector."

"They're in the supply room," Bratner said, pushing open a door and pawing through the crowded metal shelves like a dog after a bone.

"By the way," Napoleon said casually, "we heard from the Chicago office that you were having some unusual problems up here."

Brattner stopped his search long enough to glance balefully over his shoulder, then returned to work. "I suppose you could call it that," he

muttered. "If we don't watch out, Thrush may get us evicted for urban renewal this year."

Napoleon and Illya exchanged glances. "I never realized that Thrush was civic minded," Napoleon commented.

Brattner snorted. "These new boys, Forbes and McNulty are quite a pair. They know the general location of headquarters, but they've never been able to pinpoint the building. So McNulty came up with the bright idea of getting the whole area condemned for urban renewal. The new expressway is going to miss us by just a few blocks, a new civic center is being pushed for an area even closer, and urban renewal is cropping up everywhere. You saw what that street outside looked like; it wouldn't take much to get this block included. We kept ahead of them while we had their headquarters bugged, but recently their lobbying has begun to pay off." He backed out of the crowded supply room, holding what looked like a miniature oscilloscope with a three-inch screen. "Here's the big detector," he said, handing it to Illya. "Now to find the wrist model."

"Would it really be such a big job to move?" Napoleon asked/ "It's rather a small operation, compared to, say, the Chicago office."

Brattner snorted as he returned to his rummaging. "Do you realize what the telephone company charges to install all this special equipment? And you know what Mr Waverly is like when it comes to the budget; why do you think we're in this low-rent area to begin with? Oh, sure, we could move if we had to. But it would cause a lot of problems. Besides, how would it look on my service record? Who's going to promote an agent who got run out of his won headquarters by urban renewal? Somehow we've—ah, here it is!" He emerged from the room with a wristwatch-sized device which he handed to Napoleon as he kicked the door shut.

"Shall we check them out?" asked Illya, wiping a layer of dust from the larger detector's screen.

Brattner nodded and led the way down the hall. "Certainly. I think they're in good shape, but we haven't been able to keep up our periodic checks lately, the way we're undermanned." He pushed open the last door on the left. "Here's our lab."

Illya walked over to the bench full of electronic equipment that lined one wall. He pulled what looked like a small, complicated signal generator to the front of the bench, flipped a switch on its front panel, and expertly plugged a pair of angling leads into the back of the detector. After waiting a few seconds for the transistorized circuits in the tester to stabilize, he began setting the controls. When he was finished, he pressed a final button and watched the detector screen closely.

A second later, a sharp beep sounded and a bright green dot appeared on the crosshatched screen. "Very good," Illya murmured. "It's as close as we can expect with a screen this size." The dot slowly faded until it was barely visible. "Did the wrist model pick it up, too?" he asked, turning to Napoleon.

"The needle flickered," Solo replied, "but it didn't get a chance to home in."

Illya nodded. "I didn't think it would. There isn't much leakage radiation from these testers." He unplugged the larger detector from the tester and held the leads in front of him while he pressed the button on the tester again.

"That got it," Napoleon informed him. "It's pointing at you."

"Fine," Brattner said. "We have two antenna setups for the standard rig—one in our communications center down the hall and one in my car. Which do you want?"

"We'll take the communications center, if it has any comfortable furniture in it," Napoleon decided. "We don't really need a fast getaway; after all, the idea is to trail them at a distance. And I could use some sleep, after the past few days."

"There's a couch," Brattner said, leading the two agents across the hall into a room that was a miniature version of the New York communications center. Illya could recognize among other things, a console that apparently was linked directly to the main data center in New York. He also recognized the couch and headed for it.

"You dozed a few minutes while I was driving up from Chicago," he informed Napoleon, "so I have first rights to the couch."

Napoleon slumped into a chair in front of one of the consoles. "Very well," he conceded, "but if we're dividing things all that evenly, I shall expect a bit more help than you usually give when it comes to making out our report." Peering about the console, he located the antenna jack and attached the detector.

"I'm getting a little behind on sleep myself," Brattner announced. "Unless you need me...?"

"No, go ahead," Solo assured him. "Keep your communicator handy so we can contact you if anything happens. I assume you don't live too far away."

"Not far. I can be here in five minutes if—" He broke off abruptly and Napoleon whirled to the detector. The sound of a beep was dying away and a bright green dot showed two thirds of the way up the screen. Illya came jerkily awake and sat up on the couch. Brattner peered over Napoleon's shoulder at the detector screen.

"Thrush doesn't like to waste time, does it?" Napoleon commented. "Can you tell the location?"

Brattner shook his head. "Doesn't look as if it's moved from her apartment. They can't have taken her far, certainly."

"Strange," observed Illya as he joined them in front of the console. "It takes at least ten minutes for the coating to wear off the pill and expose the battery plates, and even with the worst case of acid indigestion, another five minutes for the charge to build up. They should be a mile away at least."

"Call your men at the apartment," Napoleon ordered. "Something may have gone wrong."

Brattner shook his head. "Can't," he said. "Since they went there for the purpose of getting knocked out, they left behind any equipment that might help Thrush—and that includes communicators. No sense in making Thrush a present of our stuff."

"All right," Illya said. "Let's get this detector into the car before the transmitter builds up another charge."

With Brattner in the lead, the agents retraced their steps through the record shop. They were in the car heading north, with Brattner at the wheel, when the detector beeped a second time. "Same place," Brattner said after a quick glance at the screen. "It's her apartment, all right; distance and direction both check."

They parked a block from Kerry's apartment, and waited for another signal from the detector. When it came, the source was still shown as the apartment, and this time the short-range wrist detector indicated the same direction.

"Let's go," Napoleon said. "Illya and I will check this out. Don, you keep your communicator channel open and be ready to back us up. I suspect," he continued, turning to Illya, "that it would be better to approach through the alley, rather than marching up to the front door."

Minutes later the two agents stood in the dark alley, trying to see through the bushes that lined the back fence. "Let's wait a few minutes," whispered Illya, "and see if we get another signal from the transmitter. One is due about now."

Napoleon nodded and looked up and down the alley. Garages lined both sides almost solidly, broken only by an occasional bush-lined fence like the one they stood behind. His nose assured him that at least one open garbage can stood nearby. "I hope no honest householder develops a sudden urge to carry out his garbage," Napoleon whispered. "Our presence here could be misinterpreted rather easily."

"Yes, I'm sure it could," a new voice broke in softly. "Just keep your hands in sight and don't make any sudden moves."

A large man stepped through the gate that opened on the far side of the nearest garage. His right hand held an object that gleamed in the faint moonlight and which was trained steadily on the two agents. As he approached, a light came on in the back yard of Kerry's building. Another man stepped through the gate to that yard a moment later. He was also armed.

Napoleon and Illya breathed simultaneous sighs of relief as they recognized the guns as U.N.C.L.E. Specials like their own. "You must be the agents

guarding Miss Griffin," Napoleon said. "I'm Napoleon Solo and this is Illya Kuryakin; we're from the New York office."

The guns didn't lower. "Let's see your identification, then," one of the men said.

Napoleon and Illya eased out their wallets and displayed the gold cards. One of the local agents took their wallets and inspected the cards closely, then handed them back and holstered his gun.

"Okay," he said grudgingly. "You're who you say you are. But what are you doing skulking in the alley?"

"We started picking up signals from the transmitter about half an hour ago," Napoleon replied. "Has anything been happening here?"

"The bedroom light came on for a time about three quarters of an hour ago, but that's all. No sign of Thrush activity."

Napoleon frowned. "We'd better check things out. You can turn the light out and go back to your posts. Illya and I will go in and find out what happened."

The lock on the back door yielded to Solo in a matter of seconds and the two agents stepped silently inside. They stood motionless for a moment; gradually, the kitchen took shape in the darkness around them. The house was quiet except for an occasional snore coming from a room halfway down the hall.

Napoleon inched up to the doorway and cautiously peered around the corner. There was just enough light filtering through the shades for him to make out a sleeping form. Napoleon drew back and motioned Illya into the kitchen.

"We'd better wake her up and find out what happened," Napoleon whispered, "but how do we do it without frightening her half to death?"

Illya shrugged. "Go back outside and ring the doorbell."

Napoleon stared at him. "Your devious Russian mind is showing," he whispered. The two agents silently left the house.

Two minutes later, they were standing at the front door, confronting a disheveled and confused Kerry Griffin. She smiled sheepishly when they had explained the situation.

"After you left earlier," she explained, avoiding their eyes, "I went right to bed, but I woke up with a headache. It must have been force of habit, to take an aspirin from the bottle next to the bed. I'm not really very alert at times like that; I didn't think about the aspirin being your transmitters. I'm sorry I caused you all this trouble."

"That's all right." Illya reassured her. "It gave the instruments a good checkout. Now we know they work correctly. You get back to sleep and we'll see you tomorrow."

"Incidentally," Napoleon said, "did the transmitter cure your headache?"

Kerry looked startled. "Why...yes, it did! I feel fine, now."

"Remarkable. Well, try not to take any more of them; we'll keep a check on this one and see how long it lasts."

Kerry nodded agreement, said goodnight to the agents, and stepped back inside. Napoleon and Illya tracked down the local U.N.C.L.E. agents for a conference.

"Just a suggestion," Napoleon warned them. "Don't be quite so efficient when and if the real Thrushes show up. Remember, the object is to get Kerry captured without getting yourselves killed, and coming out with guns in your hands is a bad way to do that. Let them get the drop on you; they won't shoot if they don't have to. Too noisy."

The agents nodded. "It's just that we've been trained to never take a chance with Thrush, and it's hard to break the habit."

"We sympathize," Illya said, "but remember that this time capturing Thrush agents gets us nowhere, and shooting it out with them is equally useless and could get you killed."

"Good enough," Napoleon said. "Now we had better get back downtown if we're going to get any sleep at all tonight. He glanced at his watch and groaned. "One-thirty already. Let's get back to the car."

Brattner looked up quizzically as Napoleon and Illya climbed into the car. "She took it by mistake while she was half asleep." Napoleon explained. "Keep the detectors on; we'll run a check of transmitter life. It varies according to whose stomach it's in, you know."

As the car pulled out into the street, the detector beeped again. "Oh, shut up!" Illya muttered irritably, then stopped abruptly as he looked at his wrist detector. "What does yours show?" he asked Brattner.

"Not much," he replied, then slowed the car to take a more careful look. "Hey, it's moved—I think."

Illya was checking his wrist detector. "Hard to tell, it hasn't moved far yet. Wait for another signal."

Brattner stopped the car completely and all three agents watched the screen of the larger detector. The next beep came on schedule and showed that the transmitter had definitely moved. "At a guess, they're headed for the south side on Lake Drive," Brattner said, and gunned the car forward.

"Don't make too good time," Napoleon said. "We want to trail them, not head them off." He smiled in rueful admiration. "That was a slick operation. Thrush must have had someone watching the house, and they slipped in while we were having our little conference with the local agents. Very efficient."

Illya nodded. "But a trap is a trap, no matter how efficiently one walks into it. Old Russian proverb."

"I thought you were too sleepy for that sort of thing," Napoleon complained. "Incidentally, Don, where are the other two agents, the ones on the day shift?"

"Home in bed, I hope," Brattner replied. "They're due back on duty at seven. Why?"

"I was thinking that the agents back at the house should be notified that their quarry is gone, so they can get some sleep themselves. We'll need everybody on the job tomorrow—today, rather. And since they don't have their communicators, you can't reach them directly."

"You're right. I'll call George and have him drive over. He's up with a sick kid half the time anyway. Or maybe you'd better call, since I'm driving. It's channel J."

Napoleon made the call; instructing George to notify all agents to assemble at headquarters with full equipment at six A.M. Brattner muttered something about "undermanned" but continued driving. They came to a swooping downhill curve that went past a set of darkened tennis courts. He pulled off to one side of the street and turned off the lights. "That's the Drive down there at the flasher," he explained. "We'll wait here until we get another transmission. We might even be able to spot the car, if we're lucky. If it hasn't gone by already. If it's really on the Drive."

The beep came a minute later. Brattner looked at the screen. "South, but not far. They must have passed just before we got here." He flipped on the lights and drove on down the hill and past the flasher onto the Drive.

Ten minutes later, they were off the Drive and parked on a back street in an industrial section, waiting for another signal. On the left and ahead, something belched flame into the night, and on the right, a tremendous, brightly lighted clock tower was visible a half mile away. Napoleon noted with distaste that it was almost two o'clock.

The next signal was still from the south and farther away. "They could be heading for the south expressway and Chicago," Brattner commented.

"Let's hope not," said Napoleon. "We've had enough problems with Chicago recently."

The next beep showed their quarry pulling to the east, paralleling the lake shore. Brattner looked puzzled as he pulled out and drove southeast on Kinnickinnic. "A suburb?" he asked of no one in particular. "No wonder we couldn't find their new headquarters. If Thrush can afford to move into the suburbs, why can't we?" he muttered resentfully.

Two beeps later, they were sitting in the middle of the suburb of Cudahy. "Looks like this is the place," Illya noted. "They didn't move between the last two signals."

Brattner nodded. "Back northeast," he said. "We should be able to get within range of the wrist detector by the next signal."

It took them fifty minutes and four more beeps to narrow the search down to a twelve-unit apartment house two blocks from the suburb's main business section.

"Now what?" Brattner inquired. "We don't have enough men to raid a place that size. For that matter, two months ago Thrush didn't have enough men to defend it. They must have been bringing in agents while we were sending ours to San Sebastian."

"Maybe they've just taken part of the building," Napoleon suggested. "How many men are there in the local satrapy?"

"It varies. The last time we had an accurate count, they had six. That was right before Forbes and McNulty arrived. I know one of those is in jail at the moment; he was trying to get away from George the other night and had the misfortune to run into a police car. But I don't know how many they may have added recently."

"Okay," Napoleon said. "We'll have to do the best we can. Tell your men to get down here first thing in the morning. We'll stay here and keep an eye on the place. I'd like to observe the comings and goings for a while before we charge in blindly; perhaps we can get some idea of Thrush's strength by the time your men arrive."

Napoleon turned to Illya. "We'll take turns watching," he said. "You dozed at the local headquarters. It's my turn now." Without waiting for Illya's protest, he slouched down in the seat and closed his eyes.

Brattner sighed, took out his communicator and began making calls.

Chapter 5

"You Never Know When a Dirigible Will Come in Handy"

Kerry stood in the doorway for a second, watching Illya and Napoleon cross the porch and start down the front steps. Reluctantly, she closed the door and turned back toward her bedroom. The two agents had been very patient and understanding, but she still felt embarrassed about the incident. She wasn't used to making such silly mistakes, and she wouldn't blame Illya if he thought her an utter fool. And he was really rather sweet, the thought, as well as intelligent enough to understand a government proposal at first glance.

Embarrassment and the effects of the sudden awakening made her feel anything but sleepy. She hesitated a moment at the bedroom door, then continued down the hallway toward the kitchen. Something to eat would settle her nerves, she thought as she pushed open the kitchen door. A glass of milk, perhaps, and a piece of cold chicken would make a good snack.

As she reached for the light switch, something that felt like a steel band clamped itself around her waist and an enormous hand covered her mouth and most of her face. A voice came from the semi-darkness in front of her.

"Now then, Miss Griffin, we don't want to be unmannerly about this, but on the other hand we can't allow you to scream for help or turn on any more lights. There are at least two U.N.C.L.E. agents with fairly sharp ears and eyes just outside. We have gun, of course—one pointed directly at you, by the way—but we don't want to cause any more disturbance than necessary. So if you will promise to behave quietly, we can avoid such unpleasantnesses as tying and gagging you. If you agree, nod your head."

By the time the voice stopped, Kerry had had time to collect her wits and consider the situation. This was what Illya and Napoleon wanted, she thought. Besides, if she screamed, the agents would have to pretend to come to her aid, and with Thrush—and these *must* be Thrushes!—playing for keeps, someone could get killed. She nodded her head.

"She nodded," a voice rumbled from a foot above and behind her head.

"All right, Andy; let her go," the first voice said, and the vice-like grip was gone as quickly as it had come.

"Now isn't that much better, Miss Griffin?" the voice continued. "We don't want to inconvenience you any more than necessary, so I think we can spare a few moments for you to pack some things. We're taking you to see your uncle and you may be there for some time, so let's all go back to your bedroom where you can choose what you'll need."

As the voice stopped speaking, the door to the hallway was pushed open before her, and a man who was built along the general lines of a Percheron was outlined against the hallway light as he moved through the door. Kerry obediently followed him through the hallway and into her bedroom. A second later, the owner of the first voice entered and flipped on the light switch. She was startled to notice that he was just the opposite of the one he had called Andy—small, conservatively dressed, with a rigid crew cut. Very inoffensive looking except for the gun he still held trained on her.

Under the watchful eyes of the two men, she hastily stuffed some clothes and other necessities into a small suitcase. During this time she learned that the smaller man was Arpad McNulty and that they were indeed Thrushes. When she had finished, Andy was sent to check the back door.

"The guy's back on duty," he reported. "All ready to keep us from comin' in, but"—he gave a rumbling chuckle—"he ain't expectin' nobody to bust out."

"All right, Andy. You take him out, *quietly*. Miss Griffin and I will follow." With stealth incredible in such a large man, Andy eased open the door and slipped out into the night.

A moment later, McNulty took Kerry's arm and urged her to follow. As they stepped off the porch onto the walk, she noticed the form of the back door guard sprawled under the shrubbery beside the garage. McNulty hurried her through the back gate and along the alley to the north. At the street, a car was waiting, Andy already at the wheel. He was rumbling to himself as the two piled into the back seat. "That old boy's really gonna have a head when he wakes up." He chuckled. "Y'know how I got him, Arpad? Y'see, he—"

"It was a very good job, Andy," McNulty said, "and you can tell me about it tomorrow. Right now, get us out of here."

Kerry felt a vast relief. The plan had worked, at the cost of nothing more serious than a bruised head. The shock she had received on seeing the body was replaced by a feeling of well-being and adventure. It was an effort to remind herself that she was still a captive, even though she had only the two agents' word about how easily she could be freed. So far, Thrush had been terribly efficient.

McNulty was in an expansive mood. As the car started off at a moderate pace, he smiled at Kerry. "The secret of a successful operation is to remain inconspicuous," he said smugly, oblivious to her sidelong glance at Andy's garishly clothed hulk. "Thus we move very carefully with the traffic flow. We don't drive below the speed limit because we don't want to be picked up for loitering, but—"

"How did you get into my apartment?" Kerry asked. "It was locked and there were two U.N.C.L.E. agents guarding it."

McNulty favored her with a superior smile, "Another secret of the successful agent: be alert and watch for your opportunity. Or, as one of our rival organizations puts it, 'Be prepared.' The guard at the back was ready and alert except for a few brief moments when your two friends left. We simply sneaked in then."

"But the door—"

"Locks," McNulty stated, "are no barrier to Thrush."

"I see. Could you tell me why you chose to kidnap me? I know nothing that could be of any use to you, especially if you already have Uncle Willard."

McNulty looked offended. "Kidnapping, Miss Griffin? I prefer to think of it as arranging a reunion between two devoted relatives who have been separated by unfortunate circumstances. We must, of course preserve Thrush security; you, who have worked on classified government documents, must appreciate our position."

"Did my uncle request this reunion, then?"

"Not in so many words, perhaps, but we felt sure that having his favourite niece with him would spur him to even greater efforts on our behalf. We are not a heartless organization, Miss Griffin, as you can see. No expense is too great for Thrush if it contributes to the well-being."

"I see," Kerry repeated noncommittally, and fell silent. McNulty settled back and hummed quietly to himself as they drove.

Kerry kept a careful check on their progress. Prisoners did this in all the spy movies she had seen, in order to locate the secret hideout they were being taken to. But in most of the movies, the prisoners had been blindfolded, she realized, uneasily. McNulty didn't seem to be the careless type, so she could only assume that he was confident that any knowledge she gained would do her no good. But, then, he wasn't reckoning with the tiny transmitter beeping away in her stomach. As the car drove on, she tried not to let her growing feeling of anticipation and excitement show.

Forty-five minutes later, the car pulled up in front of a medium-sized apartment building, a few miles south of Milwaukee. A thrill ran through Kerry as she realized that this was probably the secret Thrush Headquarters that Brattner had been unable to locate. Right here in Cudahy, She thought wonderingly.

McNulty ushered her out of the car and closed the door behind her. The car moved smoothly off to the building parking lot. Kerry felt vaguely disappointed that a section of lawn hadn't risen up to reveal a secret entrance for the car and themselves. Instead, they walked prosaically up the front steps and through the front door. Inside, McNulty led her down a long hallway and stopped in front of an apartment door and rang the bell. A beefy man in an ill-fitting suit answered the door. Another inconspicuous secret agent, Kerry thought as the man gestured them inside.

The apartment was furnished simply but was tastefully decorated. A tall, lawn man with graying hair rose from a couch as they entered. Attired in a smoking jacket and slippers, his trim appearance and erect bearing made Kerry think of a retired army officer. He bowed slightly. "Miss Griffin, I presume? I am Ivan Forbes. I assume you have become acquainted with our Mr. McNulty." He didn't bother to introduce the beefy man.

Kerry looked at Forbes coldly. "Am I to assume that the ultimate responsibility for the implementation of this unseemly abduction lies in your sphere of authority?"

Forbes stared at her. "I beg your pardon?"

"I'm not sure," McNulty spoke up, "but I think she asked if you were the one who ordered her kidnapped."

Kerry nodded. "That was the primary intent of my query."

"Ah, yes," Forbes smiled militarily. "I wouldn't put it in such harsh terms. I would rather consider it—"

"I know. Mr McNulty and I have been through that already. Well, I've been brought here to see my uncle; where is he?"

Forbes turned to the beefy man. "Bring Dr Morthley in."

As the man crossed the room to an inner doorway, the doorbell rang and simultaneously there was a buzzing sound from the general region of Forbes' jacket pocket. McNulty opened the door to Andy, and Forbes removed a metallic box about the size of a cigarette pack from his pocket. He snapped it open with a practiced flip of the wrist and spoke into it.

"Forbes here."

There was an unintelligible mutter from the other end which made Forbes frown. "About two hours ago, you say? Yes, that would be about the time those second two showed up to guard Miss Griffin. You're probably clear, then. Get over here as fast as you can, before they pick you up again."

Forbes started to close the communicator but changed his mind as he remembered something. "Have you gotten rid of that damned earring yet? I told you before it was too conspicuous."

Another mutter came from the communicator, and Forbes snapped, "Well, do it! *Before* you start for the apartment. Just remember who's in charge of this satrapy now!" Without waiting for a reply, Forbes closed the communicator and returned it to his jacket pocket.

He turned to McNulty. "Whoever was watching Hunter disappeared around midnight. I just hope he can make it back here without being spotted again."

He's a good man, but I do wish he didn't look like Mr. Clean."

"Are you sure it's just his nonconformist streak?" McNulty asked, sensing an opening. "After all, he was the number one man here until we came, but his record shows he was never a well-coordinated member of the team."

Forbes sighed, and Kerry felt a flash of sympathy. People like McNulty usually made her feel like sighing, too. At that moment, the inner door opened and Willard Morthley stepped into the room, closely followed by the beefy man. Dr Morthley was a spry, elderly gnome with a shock of white hair which he fondly believed made him resemble Einstein. It actually made him resemble an elderly man badly in need of a haircut, but Kerry had never been unkind enough to point this out. He smiled at Kerry.

"I'm happy to see you, my dear. They told me you were coming."

"Are you all right, Uncle Willard? Your disappearance caused marked apprehension and a search, thus far fruitless, I fear, was instigated."

Morthley nodded. "I'm fine," he reassured her, "and so is my project. In fact, we're getting along quite well with it."

"You're getting along well with it? You mean you're working on it? For *them*?"

"I think you'll find we aren't such hard people to get along with, once you get to know us," Forbes broke in.

"Exactly," said McNulty, "our entire organization and all its plans have been unfairly maligned by our opposition. We aren't the megalomaniacs they would have us believe; we're simply hard-headed realists."

"And just what is your hard-headed realistic plan at the moment?" Kerry asked.

"Our plan," McNulty began, "is simply to provide the world with efficient leadership. Look at the state things are in now: fighting, chaos, communism, and sheer anarchism everywhere. What the world needs—the United States most of all—is good, strong, solid, realistic thinking. You can't successfully fight subversion without it. And we have it. Thrush could usher in a period of world prosperity undreamed of—"

"Yes, Arpad," Forbes interrupted. "It's a very moving oration, but it's late and I'm sure Miss Griffin and Dr Morthley would like to get back to their interrupted sleep." He turned to the beefy individual. "Green, show them to their quarters."

Green led them into a bedroom then through a connecting door to the bedroom of another apartment. After they entered, he slammed the door shut and left. Kerry turned to her uncle.

"You can't be serious about working for these people!"

Morthley made a sound halfway between a chuckle and a cackle. "Oh, I'm working for them all right; I don't seem to have much choice. And I decided at the start that I'd have more freedom and a better chance of slipping away if I appeared to cooperate willingly." He sighed. "So far, though, it hasn't done me much good. Forbes is too careful. But Green isn't, so let's get back and see what they're planning."

"But aren't we locked in?"

Morthley opened the connecting door and proudly displayed a piece of wire jammed against the striker of the lock. "As I said, Green isn't too observant. Unfortunately"—he pointed to the other door of their supposed cell—"that door was locked when I came, and I haven't been able to get it open. Besides, I suspect that Green or someone is guarding it most of the time. About all I can do is eavesdrop on them, which hasn't done me much good."

The eavesdropping reminded Kerry of her secret transmitter, and she delightedly explained the entire plan. "And you've been listening to all the Thrush plans right here in their headquarters," she concluded. "You'll have all sorts of things to tell Illya and Napoleon!"

Morthley shook his head. "Regrettably, this isn't Thrush headquarters, and I haven't really learned much."

"But if it isn't headquarters, why are we here?"

"They don't have full-scale headquarters since U.N.C.L.E. discovered their former one. I overheard that much. This is just Forbes' apartment. They have their heavy equipment including my OTSMID—stored somewhere, and they hold meeting in restaurants and places like that. They're looking

for a new headquarters. I heard Forbes telling Hunter once that they couldn't afford to make a mistake in picking one; apparently the telephone company charges outrageously to install all their special equipment. I listen all I can, but a lot of times all I can hear is Forbes or McNulty talking to someone on a communicator. And one side of a conversation is rarely helpful. Anyway, I'm glad to hear that someone is finally going to get me out of here. I've wasted too much time already."

They crept silently over to the door leading to Forbes' living room and placed their ears against the door. McNulty was speaking.

"...and I have several members of the Near North Side Neighborhood Civic Improvement Association circulating a petition. The Common Council is sure to go along with any recommendation that has that many signatures. Give me another month and I can have that entire area condemned for urban renewal, U.N.C.L.E. headquarters included."

"I wish you'd give as much thought tot the invisibility problem as you do to petty harassment," Forbes replied.

"Petty!" McNulty sounded as outraged as he ever allowed himself to become at a superior. "Look at the trouble we're having, just because we don't have a fixed headquarters. And think of the long-range benefits if it works here. That area around Del Floria's in New York is no civic showplace—just think of the prestige if our plan could force U.N.C.L.E. out of its major headquarters in the United States!"

"Yes, yes, I know you have far-reaching schemes, Arpad, but the important problem right now is invisibility. Thrush Central has decreed that we find a use for it—*now*!"

"Of course," a more chastened sounding McNulty replied. "I would never think of questioning the wisdom of Thrush Central. As you must be aware, however, there are certain problems involved, such as the shape of the field generated by the machine. And the sheer bulk is by no means—"

Forbes' tones were icy. "I am aware of the problems, my dear Arpad. What I—and Thrush Central—would like are solutions to those problems. Your time would be better devoted to finding answers than to reminding me of the problems. Is that clearly understood?"

McNulty's reply was almost inaudible. Morthley stifled a chuckle and whispered to Kerry, "McNulty is out of his league with Forbes. Only one that can stand up to him is Hunter. Wears a gold earring—or did until this evening. Fascinating individual."

"In the next room, the doorbell rang. Footsteps crossed the floor and the two listeners heard the door open and Forbes' voice welcome the caller. "Good man, Hunter; you made fine time getting here. Come on in. You can stay the night here and find yourself a new place in the morning. And perhaps you can come up with a practical use for the invisibility device. Arpad"—the voice dripped scorn—"hasn't been entirely successful."

Footsteps crossed the room again and there were sounds of someone getting settled. "I'm not going to be much help either," a voice deeper than Andy's said. "I can't see any practical use for it in its present stage. I've always thought we should wait until it's better developed."

"Are you presuming to argue with the decisions of Thrush Central?" Forbes asked ominously.

"Of course I am; at times that outfit seems to be composed exclusively of dimwits. They can't wait to get their hands on this device, and then they won't send the engineers and scientists necessary to exploit it properly. Morthley is just stalling for time and you know it' we need some capable Thrush people in here to work on that thing."

A frigid silence came from the next room. "See," Morthley whispered to Kerry. "What did I tell you? If they were all like that, the world would *really* be in trouble."

The silence was broken by McNulty busily offering to make drinks. There was the clink of ice, the sounds of pouring and more silence. Kerry could picture Forbes and Hunter glowering at one another while McNulty tried to think of something to inspire team effort.

Finally McNulty broke the silence again. "What about the dirigible?" he asked.

"The what?" came Forbes' startled reply.

"The dirigible, the one here in Wisconsin. Technically, of course, it's a Zeppelin, but—"

"Hunter, can you tell me what in God's name is he talking about?"

"Didn't you know, sir?" McNulty hurried on. "We have a dirigible in a concealed hanger here in Wisconsin. Just dropping the idea to see if it floats, but we could mount the OTSMID on the dirigible. It's big enough to carry the weight, comparatively silent so we wouldn't be betrayed by the sound, and it's up in the air where the spherical field won't cause any problems. And it can be maneuvered slowly enough to avoid crashing into things." He hesitated a moment, before he went on, a self-satisfied tone creeping back into his voice. "Now that I think of it, it seems the ideal solution."

"Perhaps," Forbes grunted. "But could you first tell me what we're doing with a dirigible in the middle of Wisconsin?"

"Actually, it isn't in the middle," McNulty began pedantically, "but over in the west, not far from Minnesota. As to why we have it—well, it was also before your time, but—"

"If it was before my time, it was also well before your time, Arpad. How do you happen to know so much about it?"

"Well—" McNulty sounded a trifle embarrassed—"I'm interested in various aspects of your cultural heritage, as I think we all should be prepared for when we do take over the world. I belong to the Society for the Preservation of Rigid Lighter-Than-Air Vehicles, and—"

"Not to mention the Society of Canada for the Restoration of Absolute Monarchy," muttered Hunter.

"And when I found mention in the Thrush historical section of our acquisition of a dirigible, I naturally looked into the matter in some detail," McNulty continued, unperturbed. "It seems that Hitler grounded all German dirigibles after the *Hindenburg* disaster. One of them was offered to what was then our Third Reich Satrapy, and we purchased it. It was moved later, partly to avoid Allied bombers and partly to simplify the problem of transporting helium, since—"

"Don't lecture, Arpad. Why did we buy the ting in the first place?"

"Well, you never know when a dirigible will come in handy. Besides, it was a bargain, and—"

"Yes, I'm aware of Herr Schlossheimer's bargain-basement mentality. Sometimes I think he's working for the wrong side. However, as long as we have this anachronism—it *will* fly, won't it?"

"Oh, yes; certainly. It's been kept in readiness for instant use. A caretaker looks after it, and every year a maintenance team who used to work for Goodyear go over it thoroughly. And I've been out there myself a few times—on my own time, of course. I wouldn't think of doing this on Satrapy time.

"I'm sure you wouldn't. Very well, then. We're handicapped here anyway; we'll move the OTSMID to the dirigible site and arrange for tests. McNulty, since you seem so familiar with the situation, you get out there first thing in the morning and make advance arrangements. We'll want to move as soon as possible. Precisely where is this place anyway?"

Kerry was leaning against the door and holding her breath in anticipation when something resembling a vise clamped on the back of her neck and she was lifted from the floor. From the corner of her eye she saw Dr Morthley, similarly suspended. A large booted foot kicked the door resoundingly. There were exclamations in the next room and the door was flung open by Forbes, who took the situation in at a glance.

"All right, Andy, put them down. What happened?"

"I took a look in to see how they was getting' along, and they wasn't in their room. So Green covered the door and I came in to see what they was up to. They was listening at the door here."

Forbes produced a wintry smile. "No harm done. They're in no position to use any knowledge gained, and we'll soon be leaving here." He walked over to the connecting door, inspected it briefly, and produced the wire jammed into the lock. "Ingenious. Green, get over here!"

Green approached, trying to avoid Forbes' icy stare.

"Don't you think this is ingenious, Green?" he asked, holding the wire up for Green's inspection. "Can you see it clearly enough to see just how clever it was of Dr Morthley to have placed it in the lock when you placed him in the room?"

Green, blanching by now, muttered that he saw it.

"Then why didn't you see it when it was first put there? Thrush has very little use for men who can't keep proper guard over prisoners, and your next mistake like this will be your last. Do you understand?"

Green, his complexion fading by the second, stammered that he understood.

"Very well. Now then, we've had a long night. Andy, this time you lock up the prisoners, then you and Green go back to your room. Hunter, perhaps you had better go with them and make sure they stay alert. McNulty and I will sleep here."

As they were being shepherded back to their room, Kerry reflected that the pretense that they were guests had been swiftly abandoned. Forbes evidently hadn't been fooled by her uncle's cooperative pose. However, she thought gleefully, now she had some *real* information for Illya and Napoleon!

Chapter 6

"What Are You Nuts Doing to My Clean Floor?"

It was a lovely morning in Cudahy. The warm stickiness of the previous day had disappeared sometime during the pre-dawn hours, and the sun had come up into a crisp and cloudless day. Looking a bit less than crisp after their all-night vigil, Illya, Napoleon and Brattner sat in the car a half block from the apartment house containing Kerry and presumably Dr Morthley and an unknown number of Thrush agents. The remaining members of Milwaukee's U.N.C.L.E. branch were stations on streets surrounding the building.

"Apparently Thrush hasn't taken over the entire building," Napoleon was saying. "That's the tenth man we've seen leaving with a lunch bucket of briefcase."

Illya nodded. "There seemed to be a remarkable number of children leaving for school, also. Thrush has never been noted for encouraging a happy family life."

"It's not so bad, then," said Brattner. "I was a little worried about going up against a whole building full of Thrushes. This way we may stand a chance."

Napoleon declined to comment on such restrained optimism. "First we have to locate the apartment where they're being held. The detector seems to indicate the ground floor, which is logical; easier to get in and out. But someone will have to get inside the building and get readings from several locations in order to pinpoint the apartment. Anyone care to be a door-to-door salesman?"

Brattner shook his head. "We'd have to go back to headquarters and get some sample cases. Here"—he reached into the glove compartment of his car and pulled out a small notebook—"we can take a survey."

"A survey of what?"

"How about the Wisconsin margarine situation" suggested Illya. "It came in handy last night, but it leaves me a bit baffled. I'd be happy to learn more about it."

"Learn while you earn," said Napoleon. "I take it you're volunteering for the mission?"

Illya hesitated, glancing at Brattner. The latter shook his head. "The Thrushes know my men too well. Of course, we know them, too, but there's too big a chance of tipping them off if they see us first. Only two of them have seen you."

"Oh, all right," Illya said. He rummaged in his briefcase and came out with a comb, which he dipped in a bottle of dye and ran through his hair. "At least this stuff washes out easily; as long as no irate apartment dweller throws a bucket of water on me I'll be all right. Does anyone have a hat I can wear? All reporters wear hats."

"I didn't know that," said Napoleon.

"Actually they don't," Illya replied, "but they do in movies, which is where your average citizen gets his impression of reporters."

A brief conference on the communicators elicited the fact that none of Brattner's men wore the same size hat as Illya.

"I'll get along without one," he decided. He pulled a pair of horn-rimmed spectacles from the briefcase.

* * *

Illya pushed open the door of the apartment building and entered a hallway running the full length of the building. At the opposite end of the hall were stairs leading to the second floor and a door facing the alley. Two doors opened off each side of the hall. He quickly walked the length of the hall and climbed the stairs. The second floor was said out identically to the first. Shrugging, Illya walked to the nearest door and knocked. As he waited, the needle on his wrist detector moved, and he checked it. It pointed down, indicating a source on the first floor or in the basement. Now to get a horizontal reading to spot the exact apartment.

The door opened and a somewhat harassed-looking young woman stood facing him, holding a small boy by the hand. "Yes?" she asked in a challenging tone.

"Good morning," Illya replied as cheerily as he could. "Our local paper is taking a survey and I wonder if I might have a few minutes of your time?"

"What kind of survey?"

"We're planning a series on Wisconsin's margarine laws, and we'd like the opinions of some of the local people. So you approve, or..."

"No, I do not approve," she snapped. "Any other questions?"

Illya tried to smile disarmingly. "As I said, we're planning a series on the subject and we'd like as many viewpoints as possible. It would be very helpful if you could take the time to give me your reasons."

The boy spoke suddenly and loudly. "If you're a reporter, where's your hat?"

"I'm not a reporter; I'm a surveyor."

"Then where's your transit?"

"Hush, Johnny," the woman said. Her belligerent attitude seemed to have faded a trifle. "I suppose I can spare a few minutes, if it will help get those idiots on the ball." She made no move to invite Illya inside the apartment, and he decided not to press his luck. Keeping a surreptitious eye on the detector, he pulled out his notebook and a pencil.

"Now then," he said, "if I could have your name for the record, we can get started."

"Mrs Denver Clark," she said and spelled it out for him. She had a variety of reasons for not liking the margarine laws. Illya dutifully scribbled notes, filling several pages before she paused.

"Very interesting," he said. Suddenly the detector sprang to life. Illya deliberately dropped his pencil, and got a good look at the detector needle while retrieving it. Directly across the hall. So far so good. He straightened up. "Incidentally, I've been considering moving to Cudahy for some time. You don't happen to know if any of the apartments here are empty, do you?"

"They're all occupied right now," she answered. "There's a new building a couple of blocks south that's quite nice, I've been told."

"Someone told me one of the ground floor apartments here was vacant," Illya persisted.

"No." The woman laughed suddenly. "They probably got mixed up because that nice Mr Forbes took two apartments. Said he did a lot of work at home and needed the space. Such a distinguished looking man! He seems to do a lot of entertaining, but it's all very quiet and respectable. He's a widower, I understand."

The boy had been staring at Illya wrist detector. "What's that?" he demanded loudly, pointing at it.

"Why, er... it's a wristwatch," Illya replied.

"It ain't got no numbers on it!" the boy said accusingly.

"No, it's a very modern..."

"How can you tell time if it ain't got no numbers on it?" the boy demanded.

"Hush, Johnny," the woman said. "It isn't nice to ask questions of strangers."

"He was asking you questions," the boy asserted. "I wanna know how he tells time if it ain't got no numbers!"

"Thank you, madam. You've been a great help to us. Look for our series in the paper." Illya clutched his notebook and escaped down the stairway. At the bottom he pulled out his communicator and reported his findings to Napoleon. "I'm going to try to find the exact room," he concluded. "Kuryakin out."

Approaching the wall of the indicated apartment, he reached into his jacket and pulled a tiny disc the size of a dime. A wire led from it to an even tinier earplug. He placed the disc gently against the wall.

At first he heard nothing but footsteps pacing back and forth. Finally an unfamiliar voice said, "Green, will you sit down?"

"Ah, I'm tired of this joint." The footsteps halted momentarily, then resumed.

"If you must do something," the first voice said, "look in on the prisoners. We'll be moving out; get them packed and make sure Morthley doesn't make a fool of you the way he did last night."

There was the sound of a key in a lock, an inner door creaked open, and Illya heard Kerry's voice. "One might approximate the rudiments of courtesy by notifying the inhabitants of one's intentions before entering."

Illya removed the ear plug and returned the device to his pocket. Returning to the car where Brattner and Solo waited, he reported his success and pointed the location of Kerry and Dr Morthley.

"But if they're where you think they are," Brattner protested, "they have a window in their room. It can't be that easy."

"No," Napoleon agreed. "I don't think it will be that easy. If they could be removed simply by breaking a window, they wouldn't be there. Those windows undoubtedly aren't all they seem, they do marvelous things with plastics these days. Any such obvious escape route would also be thoroughly booby-trapped. I think I have an idea, however." He pawed through the contents of his briefcase, coming up with a coil of what looked like modeling clay. "We seem to have been well supplied by Chicago with plastic explosive."

"Provided it really is explosive and not some new device that no one has seen fit to inform us about," Illya commented gloomily.

* * *

After one of the Milwaukee agents had tested a small piece of the coil several blocks away and pronounced it explosive, Napoleon began deploying his forces. Brattner and one of his men were stationed in front of the door in the hall which led to the apartment in which the prisoners were confined. Two other agents were assigned to the other on that side of the hall, which presumably led to Forbes' private quarters. One man was left outside the building with orders to halt any attempted evacuation by Thrush forces. Napoleon, carrying the coil of explosive, and Illya, carrying the bulkier coil of a rope ladder, climbed the stairway and knocked at the door of the apartment directly over the one holding the prisoners.

"I rather hope no one is at home," Illya murmured. "It will simplify matters considerably."

Footsteps from behind the door denied this possibility. The door opened and a slender, middle-aged woman stood looking questioningly at them. "What can I do for you gentlemen?" she asked staring at Illya's rope ladder.

Both agents pulled out their identification cards and showed them to her. "As you can see," Napoleon said in his suavest manner, "we are special agents for U.N.C.L.E. and we will need the use of your apartment for a few minutes."

"Yes," Illya agreed before she had a chance to answer. "This is a very important case; kidnapping, you know." Without waiting for an answer, they stepped inside, crossed the living room and pushed open the door to the room directly above the room where Kerry and Dr Morthley were.

"This is the room we'll need," Napoleon informed the woman.

"That's our bedroom!" she protested, but the agents pushed their way in, calmly but forcefully.

"It's all right," Napoleon said. "We'll be through in just a few minutes." To Illya he suggested, "You'd better listen-in a minute, and make sure this is the right room."

Illya removed his listening device and pressed it against the floor. Moving from spot to spot under the wide-eyed gaze of the apartment's rightful tenant, he finally nodded. "They're over here, in the corner."

"Good," Napoleon replied. "That gives up plenty of room to work in. Help me get the bed out of the way."

"Now, wait a minute!" the woman exploded. "What's going on here, anyway?"

"It's quite all right," Napoleon assured her. "By the way, you said your name was...?"

"Beck," the woman replied. "I'm Mrs — Now stop that! What are you nuts doing to my clean floor? I just waxed that!"

Having shoved the bed to one side, Napoleon was engaged in laying down a ring of plastic explosive. Pinching off the end, he patted it lovingly into place and capped it with a tiny detonator.

The woman laughed suddenly. "Oh, I get it! It's all a joke, isn't it?" She looked around suspiciously and her eyes fell on the rope ladder, still coiled tightly under Illya's arm. "There's a TV camera in there!" She was trying to wave into the rope ladder when the two agents took her firmly by the arms and escorted her through the door into the other room.

"Just stay out here for a second, Mrs Beck," Napoleon told her as Illya closed the door firmly. He saw Illya nod, and squeezed down on the disc in his hand. There was a muffled roar from the other room. Napoleon opened the door, revealing a neat circular hole in the floor. Mrs Beck gasped as Napoleon sprang across the room, grasped the edge of the hole with both hands, and lowered himself through it.

Illya slipped one end of the rope ladder over a jointed iron bar which he produced from somewhere on his person and extended to full length. As he worked, he tried to reassure Mrs Beck. "These new plastic explosives are really very good. Same effect as a shaped charge; you'll note we got the required hole without even ruffling your bedspread. We'll have one of our U.N.C.L.E. insurance adjusters around in the morning to settle for damages." He dropped the bar across the hole, let the rope ladder uncoil down into the room below, and dropped through the opening.

Mrs Beck sat down on the edge of the bed and stared at the hole in her nice clean floor. "What does it all mean?" she whispered.

Napoleon landed on the edge of a twin bed, teetered for a moment and sprang to the floor. Kerry was trying to brush plaster out of her hair while crouching in a corner of the room, while an elderly man stood watching him open-mouthed. As Illya in turn landed on the bed and bounced to the floor, there were sounds of muffled shots as Brattner and his men assaulted the outer doors of the apartment.

"Quick!" shouted Napoleon. "Get up the ladder!"

Kerry and Dr Morthley stared at him for a moment, then began climbing on the bed over which the rope ladder was dangling. At that moment a stinging

white gas erupted from the baseboard, like a sprinkler system in reverse. Napoleon held his breath and tried to make his watering eyes focus on the door to the next room. He couldn't locate it. From the sounds behind him, Illya was helping the prisoners up the ladder. He fired twice in the general direction of the door; then suddenly the gigantic form of Andy loomed over him and he received a blow on the wrist that sent his gun spinning away from him. He swung left-handed, but Andy took the blow on his shoulder and plunged by him and he was suddenly facing a gun held by a man with a gold earring. A shot sounded from behind him, and the Thrush agent winced and disappeared into the clouds of gas. A blow from behind knocked him sprawling. He gasped to recover his breath, and received what felt like a lungful of white fire. Staggering to his feet, he tried to locate one of the doors to the room, and suddenly Brattner and another agent were there, helping him into the hallway. He leaned against the wall for a moment, sucking in clean air.

Figures appeared on the stairway, and Illya and Kerry ran to join the group. "Dr Morthley?" Illya asked.

Brattner shook his head. "Morthley and every Thrush in there disappeared into that concentrated smog. The Thrushes were wearing some sort of nose filters; did you notice them?"

One of Brattner's agents came through the outside door of the building. "George is out cold at the side of the building. They must have got out somehow, and got away."

Chapter 7

"Does This Look Like an OTSMID to You?"

Napoleon's eyes and lungs were slowly clearing. He looked at Illya and Kerry and smiled weakly. "We were partly successful, anyway."

Illya nodded. "I had Kerry started up the ladder when the gas hit. Morthley had fallen down; I was trying to get him to the ladder when the big one—Andy?—showed up out of somewhere and grabbed him. I couldn't see well enough in that fog to shoot him; too likely to hit Dr Morthley or you, Napoleon. I did wing one of their other men, though; man with a gold earring."

"That's Hunter," Brattner and Kerry exclaimed simultaneously.

"Then I saw Brattner had broken in," Illya continued, "so I went up the ladder and collected Kerry."

Napoleon peered through the open door into the apartment. "The gas seems to be thinning out," he announced. "Don, why don't you see to your man who got knocked out, and Illya and I will see what we can find in the apartment."

By now a small crowd had gathered in the hallway, staring at the tendrils of white haze that oozed through the broken doors.

"What does it all mean?" Mrs Beck inquired of the world at large.

Mrs Clark detached herself from the group. Still clutching the boy by one hand, she stepped toward Illya. "I suppose you think you're smart, chasing poor Mr. Forbes out like that! Well, I'll have you know it won't do you any good!" She shook her finger under his nose. "We tenants have a say as to who moves in, and if you think I'm going to put in a good word for you after this, you're crazy!"

Before Illya could reply, she stalked away, dragging the child with her. As they reached the stairs, the boy turned, produced a remarkably loud

razzberry, and announced at the top of his voice, "*That* for your old wristwatch!"

Napoleon tugged at Illya's arm. "You must have a remarkable interviewing technique. However, I think the gas has pretty well dissipated by now."

Together they walked into the apartment. The room they entered had obviously been used as an office and communications center. An adjoining similar room had been Forbes' living room.

Napoleon nodded. "Forbes took two apartments and put in connecting doors. He used one as living quarters and the other for business; changed the living room to an office, the bedroom to a stronghold for prisoners and the kitchen for...hmm." He pushed open the door and confronted an untidy heap of empty boxes, cans, and old newspapers. "Not very good housekeepers, are they? Still, I don't see any escape routes here. We had men on every door, and the windows haven't been opened..." He walked over to a window and tried to raise it. "I suspect it would take a small bomb to open them. They seem to be designed to contain everything except light waves."

Illya had been standing in the doorway between the two apartments, staring first at the living room and then at the office. Finally, he deliberately paced off the distance from the door to the wall in each room and looked thoughtful. "Now why," he mused, "should the apartment used as an office be two feet wider than the one used as living quarters?"

"Oh?" Napoleon came over and they began inspecting the walls. It was Napoleon who noted that the artificial fireplace in the living room didn't fit quite snugly to the wall. After some experimental pulling and tugging, the fireplace swung out into the room, revealing a narrow passageway between the wall of the building and the interior walls of the living room and kitchen. At the end was a door. Napoleon opened it and looked out into the startled face of Brattner.

"So, that's how they did it," the Milwaukee agent said. "It's good camouflage; from the outside that door looks like part of the wall."

Napoleon and Illya emerged. "I still don't see how Andy got through there," Napoleon said. "That place is narrow. How's George?"

Brattner glanced at his agent, who was being steadied by another man and rubbing his head. "He'll be all right. A sore head is nothing to get excited about in this business. They surprised him; he was watching the windows and didn't expect them to come out of the wall on top of him. He'll know better next time."

Napoleon nodded. "We have to talk to Miss Griffin, and I'd prefer to do it away from here. If we could use your car, while you go through the apartment and reassure the tenants that the excitement is over...? You probably won't find much in the apartment, but they did leave a small computer behind."

Brattner grinned gleefully. "That'll cost them to replace. Come on, George, let's go check the apartment. If there's any of that gas left, it'll clear your head." He handed his car keys to Napoleon. "I'll ride back with one of the boys when we're done."

Napoleon and Illya walked around the corner of the building and in the back door. Kerry was standing in the hall, near one of the battered doors. "I'm very sorry, Kerry," Napoleon apologized as they reached her side. "I'm afraid it didn't work out quite as well as we had planned."

"The fact that you were capable of accomplishing your mission insofar as it related to myself is a matter which elicits my extreme gratitude," she replied.

"Now, now," Napoleon said, "calm down. You're all right now, and we still have a good chance of getting your uncle back."

She let out a deep breath and stepped back a pace. "Yes, I'm all right now. Actually it wasn't so bad. They were very polite all the time; they were just so quietly fanatical about things. They hadn't harmed Uncle Willard, either; he'd been pretending to work with them, but they suspected that he was stalling. That's why they wanted me."

The three of them walked outside to the car. "Did you find out where they were keeping the OTSMID?" Illya asked. "They obviously didn't have room for it here."

Kerry related her uncle's information that the OTSMID had been in storage. "But they were planning to move it today," she added. "They were going to put it on a dirigible—or a Zeppelin, McNulty called it."

"A dirigible? You mean one of those things like a balloon only different? With gas bags and all?" Napoleon said vaguely.

Kerry nodded and went on to explain the unlikely sequence of events that had led to a concealed dirigible in the state of Wisconsin. "Why did McNulty call it a Zeppelin?" she asked.

"That's the German term for a dirigible," Illya said. "An invisible dirigible; it has a certain charm."

"We surprised them before they could move," Napoleon said thoughtfully. "So the OTSMID is still stored. If we act quickly, we just might be able to surprise them again." He turned back to the building. "I'm going to get Brattner started on this; cleaning out the apartment can wait."

A few minutes later Napoleon, Brattner, and three agents emerged from the building and separated to walk to their respective cars. Brattner and Napoleon joined Illya and Kerry.

"I think we have something," Brattner said. "There was some Thrush activity not far from our headquarters a month ago, down on Commerce Street. We were looking for a satrapy headquarters, so when they didn't follow up, we let it go. But it could just have been them putting their equipment in storage. We'll cover the area now. George is staying behind to finish checking out the apartment; he is quite up to strenuous activity yet. So far we haven't found anything useful, but"—he smiled happily—"they lost some expensive equipment in there. The place was well designed, too, for a rush job. I wonder who their architect is?"

* * *

Commerce Street barely deserved to be called a street. It came into being only a few blocks northeast of the U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, and it seemed to be fighting for its life with a series of railroad tracks that ran alongside it and occasionally down its middle.

Napoleon and Illya stood by their car across from one of the many warehouses in the area, one with a large parking lot alongside the loading docks. Brattner and the other agents were checking other buildings along the street. Pocketing the keys to the car, Napoleon started across the street toward the warehouse.

"There doesn't seem to be very much activity going on around this one," Illya said as they walked toward some narrow steel steps that led up to one of the docks.

The steps rattled as they climbed them. An open overhead door in front of them revealed long lines of crates, all mounted on wooden skids. A large forklift stood idly by, its motor chuffling noisily.

"Coffee break?" Illya asked.

"Strong union, apparently," Napoleon said. As they walked forward he pulled out his communicator and contacted Brattner. "We might have something here," he said. "There isn't any activity at all that we can see; not even a workman in sight."

"Unusual," said Brattner. "That place you picked is usually pretty busy. Have you checked the offices yet?"

"No, but we'll..." The roar of a powerful motor echoed through the building. "Something just took off," Napoleon said into the communicator. "I think you'd better get your men down here." Replacing the communicator, he took off at run after Illya, who had already started toward the rear of the building. They pounded through aisle after aisle of crates, bales and machinery. Rounding a corner they burst into an open space. A row of doors lined a wall fifty feet from them, and a forklift was laboring through one of the doors, carrying a large rectangular object. The driver was a large man wearing grey slacks, a dark brown shirt, and an orange tie.

"I wouldn't swear to the face, but the clothing looks familiar," Illya shouted as he drew his gun.

A shot rang out from somewhere beyond the doors, and chips of concrete from the floor spattered Napoleon's legs. He dived behind a convenient crate as Illya took refuge behind a stack of metal pipes.

The forklift disappeared through the door.

Napoleon risked a quick look and got off two fast shots which drew a fusillade in return. Hastily he pulled out his communicator and explained the situation to Brattner. "They've got a truck out there," he added. "If you get here fast enough, you can block their exit."

The forklift roared more loudly and a second later the engine of a truck sprang into even more noisy life. There was the sound of gears grinding, and Napoleon risked another look. This time there was no answering fire, and he caught a glimpse of the truck pulling away. Illya sprinted for the door, while Napoleon informed Brattner of the quarry's impending escape. Illya reached the door in time to see the truck vanish around a corner of the building. He turned and began running back toward the front of the warehouse.

"We're almost there," Brattner's voice came through the communicator, "but I don't know if we can—" There was a grinding sound and the crash of breaking glass, followed by sporadic gunfire. After a second, Brattner's voice came through again. "We couldn't. That truck's tough; we rammed without doing any damage at all."

Illya and Napoleon burst through the front doors of the warehouse, leaped down from the dock, and ran for their car. They could see Brattner's car, where it had attempted to block the truck's exit. Its right front fender was a shambles and headlight fragments covered the street. Fifty yards to the north, the truck was rapidly gaining speed.

Napoleon jammed the keys in the ignition as the door slammed shut. Tyres squealed as he took off in "low," shifting to "drive" as they gained speed with the accelerator floored. Illya leaned out the window and attempted to draw a bead on the rear wheels of the truck just as they thudded across a set of railroad tracks. When he stopped bouncing, he drew back inside, rubbed the back of his neck, and glared accusingly at Napoleon.

Two hundred yards away, they could see the truck rounding a slight curve and heading into a three block straightaway that ran along the river. Heading into the curve themselves moments later, they could see they were gaining very little. The truck was nearing the end of the street and braking

sharply to take the hairpin turn that wound around to the right a full hundred and eighty degrees and climbed steeply to intersect with another street that crossed over Commerce some fifty feet above it.

Instead of subsiding on the straightaway, the bouncing increased as their speed increased. Illya fired at the truck as it made its turn, but he realized that hitting a truck tyre from this lurching, swaying car would be more a matter of luck than marksmanship.

He wasn't lucky. As they braked for the turn, the truck, with hardly a pause, charged into traffic on the overhead street and headed north. Illya sat back and replaced the magazine of his pistol with a full one from his pocket.

Wheeling into the turn, Napoleon suddenly braked violently and the car swerved sideways against the high bank that lined the left side of the street. It came to a halt ten feet from a large oil drum sitting squarely in the middle of the incline.

Illya leaped out and dashed forward. A quick shove and the drum, apparently empty, rolled easily against the bank.

Pulling out into the cross street a second later, they could see the truck disappearing over a hill three blocks to the north. The blaring of horns from a stop-lighted intersection a block behind the truck indicated a difference of opinion which the truck had obviously won.

Another series of railroad tracks bounced them off the car's roof as they raced across. Luckily the traffic light was green by now and they didn't have to fight for the right of way. Topping the hill, they could see the truck, still three blocks away, bulling its way through another stoplight. A chorus of auto horns erupted as it made a rocking left turn and disappeared down the side street.

"Make a note to have some kind of siren put on U.N.C.L.E. cars," Napoleon said, swerving to avoid a car that had pulled out of a cross street in front of them.

"Yes," Illya agreed. "We don't have enough size to bluff through the way he's doing, and even if we did, I don't like the idea of killing innocent bystanders."

"Thrush isn't that particular, apparently," Napoleon said as he watched the truck charge through a red light with its horn blaring and leave a Volkswagen sitting against a curb like a broken beetle. The light was green as Napoleon and Illya raced through, with the Volkswagen's passengers staring at them in shocked silence.

"I wonder what our relations are with the local police." Napoleon wondered as he swerved out to pass a bus.

"Deteriorating by the minute, I suspect," Illya returned.

"Now what's that juggernaut up to!" Napoleon exclaimed. "We were just starting to gain on him!"

Two blocks ahead, the truck made a sharp left turn amid more blaring of horns and disappeared down a side street. Napoleon did the same a few seconds later, earning some colorful language from a bus driver he cut off.

For half an hour the pursuit continued. Whenever Napoleon and Illya started to overtake the truck, it would duck into a side street and emerge again, always; it seemed, through hordes of cross traffic that parted much more readily for the truck than for the pursuing car. By this time, the two agents could hear the wail of police sirens, but so far no police car had been able to get close enough to the chase to be effective.

Longer open stretches, however, were making it more difficult for the truck to retain its lead. Napoleon and Illya were only a few car lengths behind when the truck's brake lights flared suddenly. With a last-second twist of the wheel, Napoleon swerved the car past and stepped on the brakes.

The car skidded to a halt just off the edge of the highway and the two agents leaped out, guns ready. The truck was empty and two men were disappearing into a line of bushes atop a steep bank. Illya and Napoleon plunged after them.

Bursting through the bushes at the top of the bank, they found themselves in a cemetery, most of the graves overgrown and the headstones weather-beaten and cracked. The Thrushes were disappearing down another steep bank at the rear of the cemetery.

Illya and Napoleon cleared the remnants of a wire fence, then half jumped, half slid down the bank and plunged through a thick cluster of trees, followed by the sound of the Thrushes crashing through the brush ahead of them.

Suddenly the thrashing sound stopped and the solid thunks of a pair of car doors came to them, followed immediately by the hum of a motor and the sound of spinning tyres. The trees and undergrowth ended abruptly, and the two agents found themselves on a narrow path, just wide enough for a car. Disappearing down the path was a large black sedan.

"Back to the car!" Napoleon snapped. "If they get there first..." They raced back to the highway. The truck and their car still sat there, and the black sedan was nowhere in sight.

"At least we have the truck and the OTSMID," Illya said philosophically.

"I hope so," Napoleon replied. "But I have a distinct feeling that this was too easy."

They walked up to the back to the truck and opened the rear doors. Inside was the massive metal object they had glimpsed at the warehouse. It looked like a large metal case, decorated with a few knobs and meters. "Does that look like an OTSMID to you?" Napoleon asked.

Illya shrugged. "It looks as much like an OTSMID as you could expect," he replied cryptically.

"The immediate problem, though, is to get it back to headquarters. How's your memory of your old Russian truck driving days?"

Illya looked at him thoughtfully. "If I don't get picked up by the police; I suspect every prowler car in town will be on the lookout for this particular truck."

"You go ahead then," Napoleon said. "I'm going to take a look around back there, and then I'll bring our car in."

A few minutes' inspection showed the path behind the cemetery to be a U-shaped access road ending on a cross street about fifty yards to the east. Just a few yards from where they had emerged from the trees earlier, a half

dozen cigarette stubs lay scattered on the grass. Indentations in a sandy area of the path showed where a car had been parked.

Napoleon took out his communicator and contacted Brattner. "Anything worthwhile in the warehouse?"

"Nothing yet," Brattner replied. "The place is deserted. There are cars in the lot, but no sign of the drivers. The office is empty, too. We've been over the entire place once; we're checking more thoroughly now. Any luck with the truck?"

"We have the truck, but the drivers got away. What worries me, though, is why they should give up the truck and the OTSMID without at least a final gun battle. And they very conveniently had a getaway car waiting when they abandoned the truck. Even if this was a routine rendezvous point, the timing strikes me as remarkably good." Napoleon was silent for a moment, then went on.

"Anyway, Illya is on his way back to headquarters with the truck. I'll join you at the warehouse as soon as I can. Solo out."

He had just snapped the cap back on the communicator when its warbling beep sounded. "Solo here," he said.

"Yes, Mr Solo," Waverly's voice replied. "I have that report on Forbes and McNulty for you. Forbes has been with Thrush for many years now and is regarded as one of their most capable operators. McNulty is a fairly recent recruit, but his enthusiasm has brought him favorable notice from his superiors, though not necessarily from his comrades. The combination of Forbes and McNulty could very well prove a formidable one. I'm forwarding complete dossiers to Milwaukee headquarters."

Forty-five minutes later, Napoleon pulled his car into the warehouse parking area past the battered car that still partially blocked the driveway. Brattner came out of the warehouse at a trot. "We just found the warehouse employees," he said as he came up to Napoleon. "They were drugged and hidden away in some empty crates."

Before Napoleon could reply, his communicator sounded. "Napoleon," came Illya's voice, "Kerry just looked at the machine in the truck, and she

says it's not the OTSMID."

Chapter 8

"Charles Fort Never Mentioned Sandbags"

Illya's announcement produced a dismayed silence from Napoleon and Brattner. Then Napoleon spoke. "I was afraid of then. Thrush gave up too easily—and that getaway car was just too convenient."

"A decoy," Illya said bitterly. "They must have decided it was worth the loss of their souped-up truck to gain two or three hours' time. Which would indicate that two or three hours was all they needed. The real OTSMID is probably on its way."

"They must have a more liberal budget than we do," Napoleon said, turning to Brattner. "Back to headquarters, then? The bird seems to have flown."

Brattner nodded, but seemed to be thinking of something else. After a second, he said, "Maybe we can sell the Thrush truck and get a replacement for the car we smashed up trying to stop it." He brightened as another idea occurred to him. "You know, with the truck, and that computer we picked up in Forbes' apartment, we may end up showing a profit today."

Ten minutes later, Solo, Illya, Brattner, and Kerry were seated in the local U.N.C.L.E. headquarters, discussing their next move. "We should be able to locate them," Illya was arguing. "After all, a dirigible isn't something one can hide in one's garage. It requires a sizeable installation. And we already know it's somewhere in the western part of the state."

Brattner laughed shortly. "Don't bank on its being easy to spot. The driftless section of this state has some of the most rugged topography in the Midwest."

"Driftless?" Napoleon's eyebrows raised a fraction. "From what little I've seen of the snowy Wisconsin winters, I wouldn't think the state had a driftless section."

Illya groaned, but Brattner merely shook his head. "No, the driftless area is the section of southwestern Wisconsin that didn't get covered in the last

glacial advance."

Illya nodded. "And with no glaciers, it wasn't leveled off and filled in with glacial deposits."

Napoleon had the good grace to look suitably chastened at this display of knowledge. "The southwest corner of the state, you say? Is that the only section in which something as big as a dirigible could be hidden?"

Brattner frowned in thought for a moment. "There *might* be some areas in the north woods, but it would probably get shot full of holes every deer season, no matter how out of the way it was. And besides, Kerry said McNulty specifically mentioned the western part of the state."

"Do you have any topographic maps of the area?" Napoleon asked. "Perhaps we could narrow the search down a little more."

"Certainly; we keep a complete file of ordnance maps of the state and surrounding areas. Wait a minute and I'll get them." Brattner disappeared into one of the other rooms and returned a minute later with a file of maps and a book. "This is a guide to the state," he announced, waving the latter. "Gives you a general idea of each area." He handed the book to Kerry and began dealing the maps to the others.

It took them an hour to put definite boundaries around the area. It included the complete driftless section and some counties bordering it on the north.

"Anyplace else and they'd be spotted from the air rather easily," Napoleon summed up. "But a little camouflage over one of those gullies and they'd be safe from anything but an expert search. And if they've had twenty-five years to perfect their layout, it's going to be a major job to uncover it."

Mr Waverly was not happy when Napoleon finished his report. "Dear me, Mr Solo, I had hoped that you would have settled the affair by now. Our agents in San Sebastian report increased Thrush activity there, and you and Mr Kuryakin may be needed before long. However, the invisibility device is more important at present. I assume you will be going to southwestern Wisconsin to continue the search?"

"Yes, sir. It's a large area, though, and I can't say definitely when we'll locate something."

"Very well, Mr Solo; do your best. We have one or two part-time agents in the area you may call on for help if necessary. If possible, however, obtain their help without alerting Thrush to their status. If it becomes absolutely necessary, I can send you some additional manpower, but there are really more world crises brewing than we can conveniently handle at once. I must urge you to finalize the affair yourselves if it is at all feasible."

"Of course, Sir; we'll keep you informed. Solo out."

"I wonder if he ever wrote government proposals?" Kerry mused.

Illya grinned. "You should see his reports to the Budget Committee."

Napoleon looked at his watch. "Six o'clock," he said, half to himself. "We could start driving now, but after last night I think we could all do with an extra share of sleep." He turned to Brattner. "Would it be all right if Illya and I spent the night at your apartment? And is there a nearby hotel you could put Miss Griffin in for the night? Thrush may be gone, but they might also be still watching her apartment. We'll leave for the country in the morning."

"Is Kerry going with us?" Illya asked.

"Of course I'm going with you! They still have Uncle Willard, and besides, what's to stop them from picking me up again the minute you leave?"

"She's right," Napoleon said. "Until we get the OTSMID and Dr Morthley both safely in our hands, Kerry will be a prime target for Thrush. To guard her properly here would take Don's entire force, and they could more profitably spend their time continuing the search for the Thrush warehouse. I doubt that Thrush was able to move everything today, but even if they did, checking with the warehouse proprietors might still provide a lead."

Brattner and the local agents seemed relieved as they made the arrangements to get Kerry installed in a hotel. "Perhaps you could even use Miss Griffin's car," Brattner suggested as they were leaving. "We'll be a little short after today."

Kerry nodded yes excitedly, and Napoleon thanked her. "Every little bit helps when it comes to the budget, as Mr Waverly is wont to say."

* * *

Morning dawned bright and clear. Napoleon and Illya met Kerry at the hotel, had a mediocre breakfast in the hotel dining room, and were on their way before seven. "The food wasn't too bad, "Illya was saying as he pulled out of the parking lot, "but I didn't like the way the spoon floated on top of the coffee."

Two hours later, about the same time the food settled, they had covered the seventy-five miles to the state capitol of Madison and were debating which highway to take from there.

"As you travel, ask us," Illya quoted as they approached a service station. "I doubt their tour guides include dirigible hangars, but we do need gas."

While the attendant filled the tank, Napoleon reached over and turned on the radio. Some dial twirling produced a caterwauling teenager backed up by a thumping bass, and Napoleon leaned back with a satisfied smile. Illya looked mildly horrified and Kerry leaned more closely on his shoulder in sympathy.

"If no one has a better suggestion," Illya said as they pulled out of the station, "I'll take U.S. 18. It heads right into the heart of the driftless area."

Nobody objected. As they left the city, the "Top 47" program gave way to a news broadcast. The trio listened idly as the announcer gave the latest developments in the African crises, the Asiatic crises, and the European crises. He closed out the state and national news with the latest statehouse maneuvers to legalize the sale of coloured margarine in Wisconsin, then introduced his own local imitation of a well known network newscaster's "For What It's Worth" Department.

"Here's a switch for all you people who are tired of the same old reports of flying saucers. Yesterday afternoon two Richland Center men—they requested I not use their names—were returning from Madison on U.S. 14 when a truck disappeared from the highway in front of them."

The announcer paused for effect, and lowered his voice confidentially. "Not only that, the men said a good-sized chunk of the highway disappeared, too. There was, one of them later reported to the state patrolman who helped

pull them from the ditch, a 'big pit' that moved off down the road. A voluntary drunkometer test produced inconclusive results, according to the police report. So, if any of you Richland Center residents see any moving pits this morning give me a call here at the station—especially if they are being followed by moving pendulums." Chuckling heartily, the announcer gave way to a beer commercial.

"Apparently we picked the wrong road," Illya commented.

"Easily remedied," Napoleon said, running a finger along one of the maps. "We can cut across on another highway at Mount Horeb; it hits 14 near Black Earth."

"If we're going to Richland Center," Kerry said, "I have a friend there who could help us. She's a school teacher—and a hiking nut. She writes nature books, and she's probably been over every square foot of the county."

"A native guide would certainly be a help," said Napoleon, "but I'm not sure we should involve another woman. As you found out, Thrush plays rough."

"Oh, Lee—her name is Lee MacGregor—Lee can take care of herself. She has a roomful of marksmanship trophies, and she knows all about those oriental things—you know, karate, judo, Kung-fu."

"We'll see," Napoleon said and lapsed into silence.

West of Black Earth on U.S. 14, Illya and Napoleon began to realize their work was cut out for them. There were still occasional stretches of rolling meadows and farmland, but more and more the highway cut a winding path among thickly wooded hills that rose sharply on either side. Occasional stretches of rolling hills that rose sharply steep hillsides. A dirigible could be tucked away within three hundred yards of the road and be safe from anything but an air search.

Shortly before noon, they pulled into Richland Center. Kerry insisted on driving directly to her friend's house. Napoleon looked puzzled. "Won't she be in school?" he asked.

"Oh, no. School is out for the summer. She should be home; she always takes a couple of weeks to unwind from teaching. And she's a very good cook."

In a few minutes, they pulled up in front of a small cottage on the outskirts of the town. Napoleon expecting a veritable Amazon was pleasantly startled when Kerry's knock on the door was answered by a petite by shapely blond, dressed in paint-spattered slacks and a sweater. He noted approvingly the Lee MacGregor was one of those rare women who looked good in slacks. Even the paint smudges only added a certain note of piquancy.

She greeted Kerry effusively before she allowed herself to be introduced to the two agents. "Secret agents!" she exclaimed when Kerry had completed the introductions. She pumped their hands heartily and Illya and Napoleon noted to themselves that if her grip were any indication, she could indeed take care of herself.

"Secret agents!" she repeated wonderingly as she led them into a small cluttered living room and swept piles of books and papers from a couch and two chairs. "And I always thought technical writers only met engineers and dull executives!" She looked admiringly at Napoleon and Illya, who were looking admiringly at Kerry and Lee. "What on earth are you doing driving all over Wisconsin with secret agents?"

"You'll never believe it, but it's my Uncle Willard. He's been kidnapped by an international organization called Thrush. You see, he invented this device that makes things invisible, and..." Kerry talked non-stop for several minutes, explaining in detail everything that had happened since she had started to help with her uncle's proposal.

When she concluded, leaving Lee at a loss for words, Napoleon got in a question hurriedly. "I don't suppose that in your hikes you've noticed anything that looks like a secret dirigible hangar...?"

Lee appeared to be considering it for a moment, then blurted out, "Good heavens, no! Of course, I haven't been looking for dirigibles; but, then, they aren't the sort of thing one could easily overlook, are they?"

"Not very well," Illya said. "They're rather large. This one is probably at least five hundred feet long."

Lee thought for a moment. "There are a few placed where one *could* be hidden, I suppose. Are you sure it's in this county?"

"No," Napoleon replied, "but we know they took the OTSMID on U.S. 14, and presumably the hangar is in a rugged area, which leaves us with Richland and the area west to the Mississippi."

"Yes, that would seem to narrow it down that far, at least. But that's still a pretty large area to search."

Napoleon smiled disarmingly. "We had thought that perhaps you could pinpoint any likely areas on these maps for us," he suggested, producing the ordnance maps he had brought from Milwaukee.

Lee stood up excitedly. "Why don't I come along and show you? It would be a lot quicker than making you follow a map." At Napoleon's dubious look, she laughed. "Don't worry about me; I can take care of myself," she said and sprinted out of the room. A moment later, she returned carrying a Smith & Wesson K--38 target revolver and a box of ammunition. "I've never shot at a person, but I placed fourth in the women's state pistol championship two years ago!"

Napoleon shrugged. "If you insist."

"Give me a minute to get on some hiking boots and find some for Kerry. I'll be right back."

As they prepared to leave a few minutes later, Illya remembered Kerry's remark about Lee's cooking. A polite comment produced another five-minute delay and a half dozen peanut butter sandwiches. "They're very well cooked," Illya observed to Kerry as they followed Lee and Napoleon out the door.

* * *

The afternoon was spent in a fruitless search of the northern reaches of Richland County and parts of adjoining Vernon. Hours of driving bumpy back roads and clambering into gullies and over rocks revealed nothing but more rocks, gullies, and roads. It was almost eight-thirty when they started back to Richland Center.

"We'd better see about a place to stay tonight," Napoleon said as they pulled up in front of Lee's house, "before all the motels are full."

"Kerry can stay with me," Lee volunteered, "and I'll fix supper for all of us."

"Keep my car," Kerry said, "and come back here after you've checked in."

The motel was typical of a small-town tourist area, which meant that the walls were thick enough to keep one from seeing the TV set in the next room but didn't interfere greatly with the audio. The rooms were clean, however, and the water hot. Half an hour later, a much refreshed pair of U.N.C.L.E. agents drove back to Lee MacGregor's house.

Somehow, dinner hadn't gotten started over the two girls' conversation, so Napoleon insisted on taking them out for dinner. "After all, we've all had a hard day, and I'm sure nobody feels like cooking or washing dishes afterward. Besides, Illya and I are on an expense account; I think it will stand a pair of extra dinners."

"Don't let Mr Waverly hear you say that," Illya warned him.

The girls acquiesced rapidly and Lee glanced at her watch. "It's after nine o'clock," she said, "so we don't really have much of a choice where to go. Aside from a couple of all-night hamburger stands, about the only place open is the 'Scotch Broth.' I really shouldn't be seen there, though."

"Oh? Why not?"

Lee lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Liquor! Teacher, unlike parents, must do nothing which might exert a Bad Influence on the children!" She shrugged. "Oh well, I can always make up for it by selling another book; nature books are very wholesome and respectable."

* * *

The "Scotch Broth" emphasized its name with relentlessly pseudo-Scots décor. A faint blue haze from a charcoal grill and countless cigars and cigarettes, coupled with discreetly dim lighting, made Napoleon feel at home. Sometime after their orders were taken, they received their cocktails—except for Lee, who explained that simply being there was enough strain on her reputation, without her actually taking a drink—and were quietly

sipping when a rugged, outdoor type walked up to the table and clapped Lee on the back.

"Lee," he said happily. "How are you? I've been hoping I'd run into a friendly face this evening."

"Rollo!" Lee exclaimed, "Pull up a chair. You might be just the person we need." She turned to Illya and Napoleon. "This is our local celebrity, Robert Oshry Lavell. He writes articles on guns and hunting and everyone in town reads them and says how wonderful they are. Unlike my books, which molder on the library shelves. Rollo knows more about this county than anyone else, probably. He knows just everybody. I anyone knows where a dir—"

She broke off suddenly as Napoleon kicked her ankle.

"Mr. Lavell—Rollo, did you say?" Napoleon ignored Lee's startled look and looked at Lavell inquiringly.

"R. O. L." Lavell replied. "My initials. Some people"—he glowered at Lee—"think acronyms are funny."

Napoleon smiled uncertainly before he went on. "I'm Napoleon Solo and this is Illya Kuryakin. We're naturalists, on a field trip from New York."

By the time they had shaken hands, Lee had recovered from the kick and introduced Kerry. She smiled and nodded across the table to Lavell. "Lee said you knew everybody in the county. Does that include those two men who were on the news this morning? The ones who saw U.S. 14 disappear in front of them?"

Lavell looked taken aback. "U.S. 14 disappeared?"

Kerry recounted what she remembered of the morning newscast. Lavell's eyes widened as she spoke, and he breathed what sounded like a sigh of relief when she concluded.

"Maybe there *is* something going on around here," he muttered, half to himself. "Or, if I am cracking up, I apparently have company in my delusions."

Napoleon displayed a sudden interest. "Delusions, Mr. Lavell? You saw a pit yourself?"

Lavell looked around the table, debating with himself. "More or less," he admitted after a moment, then plunged on. "I was down towards Maplewood this afternoon, southwest of here. There's an old gravel pit down there, and I've fixed up a little private target range. I was trying out a new scope mount, one that fits a Bushnell telescope to a Navy Arms Co. percussion revolver."

"Isn't that a little impractical?" Illya asked, ignoring Napoleon's disapproving frown at the interruption.

"You don't think the gun fraternity is practical, do you? Haven't you ever seen a target match with forty-pound muzzle loading rifles? And hundreds of us, every year, pay good money for a modern replica of a revolver that was obsolete a hundred years ago. Like all true hobbyists, we're governed by novelty, not practicality. Anyway, I was down in the gravel pit, when I thought I heard something—a motor of some sort, but up in the air. I looked up and—I know this is crazy, but..."

"Go on," Napoleon urged; "we're very interested."

"Well, when I looked up, across the gravel pit, a section of one of the sides had disappeared. It looked like someone had taken a big knife and sliced a chunk right out. And I swear, the motor sound increased, and a faint voice said 'Look out, McNulty!' It was sort of muffled and far away, and a second later, something hit the ground and splattered, not twenty feet in front of me."

"What was it?" encouraged Illya.

"A sandbag!" Lavell said. "A sandbag out of a clear, blue sky!"

"Could you show us where this happened?" Napoleon asked.

"You believe me, then?!"

"In addition to being naturalists, we have a certain interest in the supernatural as well," Illya explained. "Charles Fort has documented thousands of seemingly impossible occurrences like this—blocks of ice

falling from a clear sky, even live fish once. But this is a new one; Fort never mentioned sandbags in any of his books."

Before Lavell could decide whether or not he was being put on, the food arrived. He ordered a double scotch for himself and when he had downed it, agreed to take the four of them to his target range the next morning.

* * *

The gravel pit looked like myriads of others, lumpy and abandoned. Lavell drove gingerly down a rutted road to its bottom. A homemade shooting bench stood on a small mound in the center of the overgrown pit; brush had been cleared away from one of the walls to make room for a target frame. Old tin cans and odds and ends of junk were scattered everywhere. The remnants of the sandbag still lay where it had fallen. Napoleon and Illya and the girls inspected it while Lavell wandered off to inspect his target frame. Except for the legend 50 KILOGRAMS, the bag was completely blank.

Napoleon looked around thoughtfully. "You know," he said, "if I wanted to hide a dirigible, I think I'd pick one of the gullies that runs down to the river just south of here. The Wisconsin, isn't it? Not too close to the river itself, perhaps a mile or two north, where it couldn't be seen from the river. And if I were going to test it, I'd stick pretty close to home base on the initial flight, in case something went wrong."

"Something apparently did," said Illya.

"What puzzles me most is how they installed the OTSMID in the dirigible so fast. It couldn't have been here more than twenty-four hours before they were flying it."

"There really isn't much to do," Kerry said. "If they brought some batteries with them, all they had to do was bolt it down somewhere in the dirigible."

Napoleon frowned. "That easy? We'd better get moving, then," he said, motioning to Lavell to rejoin them. "Let's hope they need a few more test flights before they're ready to move. If they move it to a new location, we may *never* find it."

Chapter 9

"I Never Realized Hunding Was a Thrush?"

Illya and Napoleon and the two girls held a council of war at Lee's house. Lee and Kerry had been in favor of enlisting Lavell in the search, but Napoleon had vetoed the idea. "After all, we are supposed to be *secret* agents, and the fewer people who know about us, the better."

"But what happens if Thrush gets the OTSMID and the dirigible both operating properly before we locate them?" Kerry asked.

"We hope they don't," Illya replied. "We know the general area now. Considering the amount of space required for a dirigible hanger and the fact that trucking in anything as heavy as the OTSMID is bound to leave traces, they shouldn't be hard to locate."

"Lee, do you have a car?" Napoleon asked.

"Of course; why?"

"If we divided our forces, we can cover twice as much territory. Illya and I can keep in touch through our communicators."

Illya nodded. "It's also an advantage in case Thrush spots us first. We'll each know where the other is, and if one party disappears, the other will know where to look."

"I'll go with Illya," Kerry announced. Napoleon and Lee simultaneously looked at one another with raised eyebrows.

"I guess we go together, then," Napoleon said.

After some discussion, it was decided to use the gravel pit as a starting point. Napoleon and Lee would work toward the west and Illya and Kerry toward the east. Lee and Kerry would drive, with Napoleon and Illya observing. Lee presented Kerry with a map of the county, showing all the back roads and creeks.

"And remember," Napoleon said as they walked to their cars, "keep in constant communication, except when actually investigating a possible site. If you disappear, I want to know where."

"Don't worry," Illya assured him, "if I disappear, *I* want you to know where, too."

* * *

The day seemed to move at a much faster pace than did the search. With nothing but Lee's ubiquitous peanut butter sandwiches for sustenance, they slowly cruised the back roads. Frequent stops were made for closer examinations of the terrain, but as dusk approached, all had proved fruitless. The sun was low on the horizon as Lee and Napoleon drove down one more dusty back road. Suddenly Napoleon stiffened and peered sharply at a particularly impenetrable looking thicket on his side of the road.

"Go on down the road a few hundred yard and stop," he ordered. Speaking into the communicator, he asked, "Still with us, Illya?"

"You sound particularly pleased," came the reply. "Found something?"

"I think so. At least, one doesn't normally see a set of tyre tracks turning off the road into the middle of a mass of bushes and trees."

"Are you sure about the tracks?"

"Not positive; I'll have to go back for a closer look. From the glimpse I got as we drove by, it seemed like someone had tried to erase them, but the sun was at just the right angle to highlight the depressions. They're the right distance apart for tyre tracks, at least. I'll tell you more when I've checked them out."

A few minutes later, he reported. "Tracks, all right' deep ones. And someone has gone to the trouble of filling in the ruts with sod. His only error was that the sod didn't quite match the height of the surrounding grass. The thicket is phony, too. It looks like some of the trees have been transplanted, and others have been cut and arranged to make the growth look thicker than it really is. I'm going on in."

Another few moments of silence, and Napoleon spoke again. "There's a road here, all right. About fifty feet of it next to the county road has been filled in, but from where I'm standing I can see it going off into the woods. I'm going to work back towards Lee; you and Kerry get over here."

By the time Illya and Kerry had arrived, Napoleon had his plans worked out. He handed his communicator to Kerry and showed her how to use it.

"All right, now. Kerry's car is already driven off the road and hidden. You two girls take Lee's and drive back to Richland Center." He quelled the outburst from both girls by raising his hand. "We are not playing cops and robbers; this is serious business. If you want to help, follow instructions. All right?" There were sullen nods and Napoleon continued.

"Illya and I will investigate. If everything goes well, we'll return to Kerry's car and drive back to join you. If everything does not go well, you"—he gestured to Kerry—"will press this button on the side of my communicator, say the magic words 'Open Channel D,' and make a full report to Mr Waverly in New York. You will then follow his instructions. In the meantime, you, Lee, will prevent *anyone* from entering your house. That includes mail carriers, milkmen, your next-door neighbor, and your best friend. Anyone in this county could be a Thrush agent, and several people probably are. There are also innocent people about, so try not to kill anybody out of hand. But keep them out. Understand?"

Lee nodded.

"Fine. Now, we'll try to report at least every half hour. If two hours go by without a report, assume we're out of action and report to Mr Waverly."

After seeing the girls safely off, Napoleon and Illya began to follow the track into the woods. It obviously wasn't a well-used thoroughfare; even where no effort had been made to hide it, there were times when the agents had difficulty following it in the waning light. Eventually, however, they rounded a final thicket and found themselves facing a large steel gate, set in the middle of a wire mesh fence that stretched off into the woods on both sides.

A large sign was fastened to the middle of the gate. WARNING! PRIVATE PROPERTY. TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULL

EXTENT OF THE LAW. Beneath this, in smaller letters, was the name TOTAL HARMONY REALTY UNDERWRITERS SOCIETY OF HURICON.

Illya pointed to the name, spelling out the initial letters. "T.H.R.U.S.H. They certainly advertise their presence, don't they?"

"Probably not expecting anyone but an occasional hunter and wanted something that sounded impressive," Napoleon responded. "Well, I suppose we have our choice: do we pick the lock or simply blast through a section of fence?"

"I wouldn't recommend either," Illya said, pointing to another sign to one side of the gate: WARNING! ELECTRIC FENCE. "You'll note the lock is wired into the electrical system; I suspect that failure on the part of either fence or lock rings an alarm somewhere." He pointed to a push-button set in the gate above the lock. "If you're in a hurry, I suppose we could ring the doorbell and see who answers."

Napoleon carefully examined the lock and gate, and stepped back. "All right, mastermind; from the tone of that last remark, I assume you have something in mind."

"Of course. A good secret agent is prepared for any emergency." Illya removed a small package from his jacket pocket and began looking up and down the length of fence. "First, however, we need the proper setting—down that way would be best, I think."

Illya strode off to the left of the path, Napoleon following closely. About a hundred yards from the path, he halted and stared thoughtfully up into the branches of a large oak tree.

"This should do it. They've kept the brush trimmed back from the fence, but they didn't get all the tall trees in the area." He unwrapped his package with proved to be a length of heavy monofilament line with a miniature grapnel attached to one end. Swinging this around his head, he cast into the branches of tree. On the fifth cast, the grapnel caught and a careful test of the line showed it to be hooked solidly.

Napoleon had watched the proceedings with interest. "What's next, kimosabe?" he asked, although he had developed a strong suspicion and his hands were smarting from only the thought.

"Next we go up the line," Illya confirmed, suiting action to words.

When both agents were well up among the branches, Illya unhooked the grapnel. "Now for the hard part," he murmured as he cast the line toward an equally large tree thirty feet away on the opposite side of the fence.

It took patience, and it was almost totally dark by the time he had the line hooked to his satisfaction. Carefully, he tied the end around the trunk of the tree they were in. "Now," he explained cheerfully, "we swing across, hand over hand."

Napoleon felt the thin line again and winced. "There must be an easier way, Tarzan."

"Nonsense, Napoleon, a little exercise is good for you. Tones up the body. Come on, or it'll be so dark we won't be able to find the path again."

Inside the fence, Napoleon rubbed his aching palms. "When I go back, I'm going through that gate, one way or another. Let Thrush sue me for property damage."

By the time they had located the path again, the only light was from a half moon that tended to duck behind small clouds at just the wrong times. The path continued for another quarter of a mile, winding through scrubby woods and up and down hills.

"Looks like something up ahead," Illya said, squinting into the shadows.

Hurrying forward, they came to a large and rather battered shed, with windows knocked out and a roof that sagged dangerously. Here the trail apparently ended. They stared at the shed.

"It doesn't look like my idea of a dirigible hangar," said Illya.

"Let's check it out," Napoleon suggested. "*Something* made those tracks."

They circled the building warily. It remained enigmatic in the moonlight. The only positive result was to prove that the road definitely ended here at the shed, although the woods didn't.

Holding his U.N.C.L.E. Special ready for action, Napoleon cautiously approached the sagging door of the shed, and kicked it open with a sudden motion.

Nothing happened.

With Illya covering him, he stepped inside. Feeling a little foolish, he lowered his pistol. The shed was empty.

A moment later, Illya entered, and they stared about the interior. There was not even a partition to block the view. The inside of the shed was a large single room, containing nothing but a little dirt on the floor. A scrap of paper on one wall proved, when examined under Illya's flashlight, to be a page from a 1927 calendar.

Napoleon shook his head. "There's something wrong about this. We *know* this is a Thrush installation; the sign on the fence told us that much."

"You don't suppose there could really be such a company as the Total Harmony Realty Underwriters Society of Horicon, do you?" Illya asked. "What's a Horicon, anyway?"

"A marsh somewhere in the state—a sort of rest stop for geese during migration, I think. And probably a town, too. I remember seeing it on our list of part-time agents. But I somehow doubt the existence of the Society, at least this far from Horicon. No, we're missing something here."

Illya rapped his knuckles on a convenient wall, muttering, "Horicon, Mukwonago, Baraboo, Black Earth—don't we have agents in any normal-sounding towns? Like Minsk, or Pinsk, or Vladivostok?"

"Do that again," requested Napoleon, suddenly intent.

"Do what again? List our agents' addresses?"

"No, hit the wall."

Obligingly, Illya rapped the wall again. Napoleon nodded with satisfaction. "Notice anything?"

"Well, it sounded pretty solid."

"Exactly." Napoleon gave his section of wall a resounding kick. "See that? No give to it; like kicking a brick wall. Now at all in keeping with the rickety appearance of this shed. Maybe we're at the right place after all."

Illya was now peering more closely at the walls. "Notice something else? Look carefully at the walls and roof. See any cracks?"

"You're right. Solid joints everywhere. This place is built much more strongly than its appearance indicates." Napoleon removed a ball-point pen from his shirt pocket, pressed a concealed stud which opened it, and rearranged its contents into the form of a compact drill. "Got the idea from a TV commercial," he commented as the bit bored rapidly into the wood.

After penetrating about an inch, the quiet hum of the drill changed to a shrill whine, then jammed. Napoleon withdrew the drill and looked at the battered tip.

"Very solidly built," he said. "At a guess, I'd say the walls are quarter-inch steel plate, covered on both sides with native lumber to give the appearance of a rickety shed. And since not even Thrush would go to all that expense and trouble for an isolated warehouse, this place is important. Now, if we can just find the proper key..."

Illya was eyeing a knothole in a board near the top of one of the windows. Suddenly he reached up, inserted his thumb in the hole, and pushed. With a quiet whir of machinery, a steel shutter slid into place across the window opening.

"That's it, then," he announced. "The knotholes are concealed pushbutton controls. I noticed there was one near each window. I think there are a few others."

They found a total of six, scattered at random points throughout the building. "Now, if we just knew what each of them controlled," Illya mused.

"Only one way to find out," said Napoleon, reaching out to press the nearest one.

There was the same quiet hum of well-oiled machinery, and a twenty-foot section of the floor began to descend into the earth.

"Jackpot!" said Napoleon, leaping onto the descending elevator with Illya close behind.

With his U.N.C.L.E. Special in his hand, Napoleon waited as the elevator slowly descended. Illya took out his communicator and brought Kerry and Lee up to date.

When the elevator finally stopped, Napoleon estimated that they had dropped at least two hundred feet. They stepped off into a well-lighted underground passage that traveled only a few yards and then opened into a huge cavern. The cavern was apparently empty of dirigibles, but several pieces of machinery stood about and a huge pile of empty packing crates were pushed against the wall a few feet from them. A small stream trickled across the cavern floor.

Illya had put away his communicator and was drawing his gun. "But how do they get the dirigible out of here?" he asked. "It wouldn't fit in that elevator."

Napoleon stooped and began examining the rocks at their feet. After a few seconds, he straightened and nodded with satisfaction. "This isn't a natural cave," he said.

Illya looked around. "It will do until one comes along."

"No, this is a ravine. Thrush has built a roof over it and apparently covered the roof with dirt and planted grass and trees on it."

"Amazing," Illya murmured; "I never realized Hunding was a Thrush."

"Richard Wagner, *Die Walküre*, and it was a tree *inside* his house, not on the roof." Napoleon tossed off the identification and returned to speculating on the hanger construction.

"They must have blocked up this end with real ricks and dirt, brace by a steel wall. I wonder how they managed the other end, though. They must have something pretty elaborate in order to get the dirigible in and out."

"Right you are, sonny," came a cracked voice from behind them. "Just drop those guns and I might tell you about it."

The two agents dropped their pistols and turned slowly to face the speaker.

The man was wrinkled with age, but still ramrod-straight, with fierce eyes and a grin revealing broken teeth. Held firmly in the old hands was a weapon Napoleon recognized with respect, even though he had never before seen one outside of a museum: an Ithaca 12-gauge double-barreled shotgun with twelve-inch barrels and a hand grip like that of an old dueling pistol.

"They outlawed those thing forty years ago," Napoleon said. "Too convenient for bank robbers."

The old man chuckled. "Well, they were advertised for home defense, and this one works right well. Don't either of you make any sudden moves, or I'll splatter you all over this side of the hanger. Now then, what brings you here?"

"Why, we received a message from Forbes, saying all agents were wanted here," Napoleon improvised smoothly. "We're from the Dubuque Satrapy, but we've been working with the Milwaukee group. I'm afraid we're a little late; we had trouble finding the place."

Napoleon was thinking furiously. This must be the Thrush caretaker. If he was alone here, then the dirigible was either being moved or was out on a trial run. Only one man—surely he and Illya could overpower him. Have to do it carefully, though; at this range, a double-barreled shotgun loaded with buckshot was the deadliest possible weapon.

The caretaker snorted. "You'll not take in old Ezra Sanders that easily. If you belong here, what were you doing with those guns?"

"Nobody answered the gate, and we had to crawl over the fence. We thought something was wrong."

Sanders appeared to be considering the statement. "Might be. Been something wrong with that call button on the gate these past few days; I think Andy pushed it too hard."

Napoleon sighed with relief and shifted position, then stiffened as the Ithaca was jabbed in is direction. "Might be ain't is!" the caretaker snapped. "You two just stay put while I think a bit."

"While you're thinking, could you tell us how they get the dirigible in and out of here?" Illya asked. "They surely don't slide the roof aside."

"Nah, that roof's solid. What we got is a big overhead door at one end. You know, one of them sectional things that slides up on tracks. Camouflaged real nice on the outside; looks like rocks and stuff. Had a hell of a time getting one big enough. But that roof, now that's real rock, with steel below. You could graze cattle up there," he said proudly.

Illya shifted position to ease an overburdened leg, and was rewarded by having the gun swivel to cover him. "Sonny, when I tell a man to stand still, I mean for him to be still," Sanders said.

"Where is everybody?" Napoleon demanded, assuming an authoritative air. "Forbes said this was urgent; why don't you take us to him instead of wasting time talking?" He can identify us."

"Forbes ain't here, and neither is anybody else but me. They took the dirigible out just a few hours ago. They ain't gonna be back, neither, so taking care of you two is up to me. Lessee now, if you're from Dubuque you got identification. Beard's a bureaucrat at heart; all his boys are loaded down with cards and countersigns. Let's see your identity card."

"Certainly," said Napoleon, reaching for his inside coat pocket.

"No sudden moves," said the caretaker. The Ithaca swung to point directly at Napoleon's stomach, and his hand halted abruptly. "Now then," Sanders continued, "just slip that identification out nice and easy, and toss it over to me so I can look at it."

Napoleon slipped his wallet out of his pocket and gingerly tossed it toward the caretaker's feet. At it struck the ground there was a muffled pop and a cloud of gas shot up to engulf the old man. Illya and Napoleon leaped sideways as a double charge of buckshot ripped through the space where they had been standing. Charging forward, Illya grabbed Sanders from behind while Napoleon wrestled the gun away from him. As soon as Napoleon had the gun, both agents released the man and stepped back, leaving the caretaker to stand with his eyes streaming tears and his mouth streaming profanity.

"Good work, Napoleon," Illya said. "I never really thought that tear gas cartridge in the wallet would ever be useful. Powerful stuff." He wiped his own eyes and retreated a trifle further.

"Now then, Ezra, we'd like you to answer a few of our questions. Where are Forbes and McNulty and the dirigible?"

The old man wiped his eyes and glared. "You're U.N.C.L.E. agents, you are! Think I'll tell you anything? Why, back in the Great War, I..."

"You mean World War I?"

"Nah, I mean the real war—the War with Spain!"

"You fought in the Spanish-American War?"

"I lied about my age. Anyways, I was a prisoner for two years, and nothing they did could make me talk."

"The Spanish-American War only lasted four months," Illya said.

"Who's tellin' this, you or me? Anyways, if the Spaniards couldn't make me talk, you two fancy-dressed punks can't."

"Are you sure?" Napoleon asked blandly.

"Sure I'm sure. You ain't got any truth serum or you'd have had a hypodermic in me by now; you U.N.C.L.E. boys are too lily-livered to use torture, and even if you did you wouldn't find out anything because I don't know anything. Forbes and McNulty and Hunter don't tell me all their little plans. You two might as well pack up and go home."

"You know, I hate to say it," said Napoleon, "but I think he's right. We could wait here for the dirigible on the chance that he's lying, but if he's telling the truth we'd be wasting valuable time. Brattner can get some men over here to clean the place and post a guard on it in case anyone shows up."

Reluctantly, Napoleon and Illya climbed aboard the elevator. The controls were plainly marked at this end. At the top they needed Illya's powerful flashlight; the moon seemed to have gone under a cloud for good. Warily the agents tramped back to the gate. Halfway back, Napoleon flung the Ithaca into the woods beside the trail. "If he wants to hunt for it, let him have it," he said. "I'm tired of carrying it." He gained a little satisfaction by

blowing the gate off its hinges with plastic explosive. It was a long walk back to the car.

As they reached the county road, Illya spoke. "How many bugs did you plant down there?"

"One in the shed, one in the elevator itself, one in the hangar and a tracer in the caretaker's pants cuff when we jumped him."

"Not bad. I put a couple of microphones in the hangar and one in his shirt pocket. We should be able to hear his inmost thoughts, at least until he changes clothes."

"He doesn't look like the type who changes clothes often," Napoleon said. "I only hope he was lying about the rest of Thrush having left the place for good."

"We'll soon know." They climbed into the car and headed for Richland Center.

Chapter 10

"Only Your U.N.C.L.E. Agent Knows for Sure"

Illya had just turned the care onto a state highway and headed north for Richland Center when Napoleon checked their direction finder and noticed that the tracer he'd planted on the caretaker had moved. He checked more closely. As near as he could tell, the caretaker was traveling behind them, heading east. He checked the instrument at short intervals and after some time decided that the man was not going to turn north but continue east.

"It would seem," he remarked, "that the bird is on the wing."

Illya nodded without taking his eyes from the road. "Whither, midst falling dew, while glow the heavens with the last steps of day, far through their rosy depths pursue thy solitary way?"

"William Cullen Bryant," said Napoleon, "and since when did Thrushes become waterfowl?"

Illya shrugged. "Very few poets have written about Thrushes. Are the mikes picking up anything?"

"Not a sound; not even a hum to show they're operating."

"That one in his shirt should at least pick up his heartbeat. He's found them; that old man is pretty sharp."

Napoleon agreed. "We're lucky he hasn't located the tracer in his cuff, and we'd better get after him if we want to stay lucky."

"What about the girls?"

"We'd better get Kerry, at least, since we're driving her car. But I don't think we should get Lee involved any further."

Illya nodded agreement. "So far, Thrush doesn't know about her, and she'll be a lot safer if they never find out. They've probably left the area, but we only have Sanders' word for that."

"And his other statements aren't proving very reliable," Napoleon said, watching the direction finder. After a second, he switched on the communicator and told Kerry to be ready to move as soon as they arrived. "And ask Lee if she can put together something for us to eat on the road."

Illya raised his voice enough to be picked up by the communicator. "Something other than peanut butter, if you have it," he said.

The sound of a bell came faintly through the communicator. "What was that?" Napoleon asked sharply.

"Just the phone," Kerry replied. "Lee's getting it." There was a minute's silence, punctuated by occasional faint background outbursts from Lee; then Kerry continued. "It was Edwin Mallard, the naturalist. He's read Lee's last book and is going to stop and see her on his way through town tomorrow, and—"

Napoleon interrupted. "Is she sure it really is Edwin Mallard, and not a Thrush agent? This strikes me as a pretty large coincidence."

"It *must* be him!" Lee's voice suddenly burst through the communicator. "Why should Thrush...I mean, they don't even know I exist, do they? Didn't you say...And this is the only chance I'll ever have to meet...He doesn't often..."

"Hold it a minute!" Napoleon broke in. "I think we can check this out for you. You just start packing something for us to eat. We should have an answer for you by the time we get there."" Before Lee had a chance to get started again, he signed off and contacted Waverly, who listened politely to Napoleon's request.

"Very well, Mr Solo. I really can't see how a naturalist could be connected with our type of Thrush, but I'll have the information for you in a few minutes." They were pulling up in front of Lee's house when he called them back. "Mr Solo? Edwin Mallard is on a speaking tour. Tonight he is at the University of Wisconsin at Madison; day after tomorrow he is to be at the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis. Is this sufficient?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much. Solo out." He smiled at Illya. "That's a relief. I didn't want to bring Lee along, and I wasn't too sure how we were

going to keep her from coming."

Kerry let them in the door and Lee bounded from the kitchen, a half-assembled peanut butter sandwich in one hand. Illya grimaced; Lee didn't notice as she advanced directly on Napoleon.

"Is it all right?" she asked excitedly.

"It seems to be," Napoleon replied, deftly avoiding the sandwich. "Edwin Mallard is in the area. Even so, it wouldn't hurt to have your friend Lavell present when you meet him."

"Wonderful!" Lee exclaimed, then looked worried. "You won't need me, will you? I mean, I'm positively thrilled at helping out secret agents and all, and I don't want to back out if you need me, but, well, *Edwin Mallard*..."

"Perfectly all right," Illya reassured her. "I suggest we get started, however. Sanders isn't wasting any time, and that tracer does have a distance limitation."

When Kerry had collected a large paper bag full of sandwiches from the kitchen, the three of them walked to the car. Lee waved briefly from the door, then ducked back inside to begin preparations for greeting Edwin Mallard.

"Whither, midst falling dew..." Illya began as he switched on the ignition.

"You said that." Napoleon checked his Wisconsin map and the direction finder. "Back down the highway," he directed. "Our quarry seems to be heading back to Milwaukee."

Illya made a U-turn in front of the house and headed for the highway. "Surely they wouldn't take the dirigible back there?"

Napoleon shrugged. "Possibly he'll turn at Madison." Sometime later he nodded in satisfaction. "He did turn. Now he seems to be angling northeast." He looked back at the detector. "And we seem to be gaining on him a little."

"Only a little?" Illya stepped harder on the accelerator. "He had to slow down going through Madison, and so will we. If he drives fast enough, he could lose us while we're getting through the city."

"Wait a minute," said Napoleon. "Now that we know the direction he's going, we can bypass Madison altogether. Turn left on Wisconsin 78—it should be a mile or two ahead—then we'll swing right and come out behind him, north of the city."

A few minutes later they were driving over a narrow, curving blacktop road. They screamed around one turn on two wheels, and Illya prudently reduced speed. "You and your shortcuts," he muttered.

Nevertheless, they eventually emerged on a major highway, and Napoleon triumphantly announced that they had gained on their quarry. "He's not more than fifteen miles ahead of us now. We should be able to cut that down a bit, on the open highway."

"And what happens if we get stopped for speeding?" Illya inquired. "Better to stay well behind than to lose him altogether."

Napoleon reluctantly agreed. "If he stays on the highway, the next town of any size is Fond du Lac. There doesn't seem to be a shortcut there; if he goes through, so do we."

Sometime later, Napoleon exclaimed, "He's stopped!"

"Where?"

"In Fond du Lac, apparently. He hasn't moved for the last ten minutes; take it easy when you get to the city limits. I wonder," he mused, "where anyone could hide a dirigible in Fond du Lac."

They swung into the city, with Napoleon hovering over his tracer. "We're close; not more than a few blocks. We...no, he's moving again!"

"Tally-ho," Illya murmured.

They crossed the business district and Illya nodded at a gas station on a corner. "He probably stopped for gas."

"Must be. He's leaving the city now, at any rate. Drop back a bit, Illya. At this distance he could spot our headlights in open country."

Illya obeyed and drove northeast out of the city. They wound along the Lake Winnebago shore for several miles, then swung up across the ridge of land, east toward Manitowoc and Lake Michigan.

Kerry yawned. "Is he going to drive all night?"

"He can't go too much further unless he takes to the water," Napoleon assured her.

At Manitowoc, the tracer pointed northeast. They followed, and had just left Two Rivers when Napoleon announced, "He's stopped again."

"This might just be it," said Illya.

"If he's stopped for gas again, he's getting very poor mileage. Drive by slowly; don't alert him by stopping."

They drove north along Lake Michigan, past a sign that announced YOU ARE NOW ENTERING POINT BEACH STATE FOREST. The highway was still winding through the forest when they spotted a rutted path leading off the highway. In the edge of their headlights, Napoleon noted a sign a few feet along the path.

"Dead end," he read, smiling. "How convenient. I do believe our Thrush is up a tree; the tracer shows him down that road somewhere. Pull on ahead and look for an inconspicuous place to pull off the road. Not too far, though, in case we have to run for it."

A few moments later, Illya pulled off the road. They got out, stretched, and began walking back toward the path. Once they flattened out in the ditch as a truck rumbled by, but traffic was light and they reached the path without further trouble.

"Do you have any idea how far it is to the lake?" Napoleon asked Kerry.

"Not for sure. I was here once a long time ago; it shouldn't be more than a mile or two from here to the water."

"All right." Napoleon gave instructions in a low tone. "We go slowly, and as quietly as possible. We'll have to stick to the road; I don't want to go blundering around in a strange forest after dark. I'll go first, Kerry in the middle, Illya last. Stay back as far as you can and still keep the person ahead in sight."

To Kerry, the advance down the pitch-black path seemed endless. They soon discovered that the moonlight didn't penetrate the branches overhead

and Napoleon's plans to keep separated had to be abandoned. They kept close together the rest of the way, occasionally blundering into bushes, trees, and each other; sometimes tripping over an unexpected rock or branch lying in the trail.

At last, after what seemed several lifetimes, there was a glimmer of light ahead and they emerged from the trees onto a narrow, sandy beach. A large dark object bulked ahead of them. Careful reconnoitering proved this to be an empty boat house, with a dilapidated pier extending from behind it into the chilly waters of Lake Michigan.

The area was utterly deserted.

Napoleon consulted his tracer and waved at the lake. "According to this, our quarry is out there, not more than a couple of hundred yards from shore."

"I don't see a boat," said Illya.

"Neither do I, and I don't think he's been treading water for the last hour. Either he discovered the bug and pitched it into the lake, or..."

"Or what? If Thrush's invisible dirigible was already here and he was in it, we wouldn't be receiving any signals. Remember, any electromagnetic energy generated within the field is invisible to anyone outside the field."

Napoleon nodded thoughtfully. "He certainly didn't drive all the way up here just to throw the bug into the lake."

"He could have been picked up by someone in a boat," Illya suggested.

"In which case, we need a more versatile means of transportation to follow him," Napoleon said, pulling out his communicator. "I wonder if the Milwaukee U.N.C.L.E. branch owns an airplane, or if we'll have to get one from Chicago."

Kerry suddenly clutched his arm and pointed out toward the lake. The night sky was beginning to lighten with the approach of dawn, and the waters a few hundred yards offshore had begun to roil and bubble.

"Something's going on out there," Napoleon said, "but it's too dark to see just what."

As the sky grew lighter, the observers could make out a low, sinister shape against the water.

"Submarine!" Napoleon whispered. "There's something for Mr Waverly!"

"You don't suppose Thrush is behind the water pollution problem?" Illya asked.

Several men busied themselves on the deck of the submarine, launching a small boat. It putt-putted in toward shore and the three watchers scrambled for cover when it became evident the boat was headed directly for the pier. By the time it arrived, they were safely concealed in a thicket not far from Sanders' car.

With the boat safely moored, the man climbed onto the pier and sauntered onto shore and up to a log that lay only a few yards from Napoleon, Illya, and Kerry. He sat down, lit a cigarette, and settled down, apparently prepared to spend the rest of the morning there. A vagrant breeze tickled Kerry's nostrils. She opened her mouth to sneeze and immediately found Napoleon's hand over her mouth and Illya's fingers pinching her nose. The sneeze subsided into a muffled gurgle which the man evidently didn't hear.

Several minutes later, there was the sound of a car bumping its way along the beach road. It came into sight shortly afterward, an elderly vehicle containing two men. The driver pulled off into the trees and the two men emerged and walked down to the beach where the boatman met them.

"There are only two of you," he said sharply. "I was told there would be three."

"He was detained," one of the men replied. "Some idiot driver ran him off the road north of Chicago. He called us while we were waiting at the rendezvous point; said he was going to get the car fixed and could follow us in a few hours. I would have been conspicuous to wait much longer, so we came ahead."

The boatman cursed casually. "McNulty won't like this. U.N.C.L.E. found the hangar, and McNulty wants to get the dirigible away from the state as soon as possible."

The other shrugged. "We're just technicians. If he wants someone with experience piloting a German dirigible, he's going to have to wait."

The boatman pulled a Thrush communicator from his pocket, snapped it open, and reported. There was a reply the observers couldn't hear, and the boatman closed the communicator. "Okay," he said, turning to the new arrivals. "Come on. We'll wait offshore."

The men boarded the boat and it moved slowly back toward the submarine. As it reached the sub, the boat was hauled aboard and the men disappeared down the conning tower. After a minute, the submarine submerged and, as it disappeared, there appeared briefly a shallow, circular pit in the water, not twenty feet from where the conning tower had been.

Napoleon watched closely as the pit vanished again. "The dirigible is right there. It must be moored to the sub with the OTSMID field ending just above the water to hide the mooring line. See there"—he gestured to where the pit had now completely refilled—"now that I know where to look, I can see a couple feet of line sticking out of the water. See how it disappears in midair?"

Illya nodded, "A sudden storm might produce interesting results."

"No such luck," replied Napoleon. "The weather forecast is for clear and calm. Well, now that we've located it, what do we do with it? Dr Morthley is probably on board, so we can't shoot it down."

"Even if we got him off, we probably couldn't do it, not with these." Illya held up his U.N.C.L.E. Special. "We'd need at least a machine gun to bring it down under the circumstances."

"It looks as if the missing German dirigible pilot may be our best bet, if we can waylay him," Napoleon said.

Illya nodded. "*Ja, mein kapitan*; I was afraid you'd think of something like that."

They wriggled backwards out of the thicket and crept as silently as possible back into the trees. Then they moved back down the road until they were near the highway. As they went, Napoleon reported the submarine to Mr Waverly, who promised to have their Chicago office look into the matter.

With that meager assurance, Napoleon called Brattner, who was more cooperative but couldn't guarantee to have his agents there in much less than three hours.

"Looks as if we're on our own," Illya remarked as Napoleon pocketed his communicator. "Any ideas on how to stop our missing pilot?"

Napoleon looked up and down the path, then pointed to an especially bumpy section. "We'll have as good a chance here as anywhere. He'll have to go slow. If he has a window open, one of us can get him with a sleep dart. If the windows are up, I think we can get the door open before he can react. After all, if he was a German dirigible pilot, he can be very young."

"And if the windows are closed and the doors locked?"

"Then we hope we can pry him out before he thinks of calling his friends." Napoleon opened the briefcase he had been carrying, removed what looked like a lump of wet clay and placed it in the center of the road, just beyond the rough stretch. "That should stop him, if we have to use force."

They didn't have to use force. The pilot was a fat little man who turned off the highway with excessive care, traversed the woods road in low gear, happily humming "Muss i Denn", and came to a complete halt at the rough stretch.

As he leaned forward to peer myopically through the windshield, Napoleon aimed carefully at his neck and fired the sleep dart. The man slapped at his neck, turned to stare in astonishment at the side of the road, and collapsed on the front seat. Napoleon and Illya rushed forward and lifted him out of the car.

Illya stared at the pudgy unconscious form. "I hope none of the crew knows him personally," he said. "My powers of impersonation are restricted to a bit of German air lore and an accent; amorphous, I'm not."

"How about the ability to cloud men's minds?" suggested Napoleon, removing a bottle of hair dye from the briefcase. "How are you at humming 'Muss i Denn'?"

Illya sat stoically on one bumper of the car while Napoleon applied the dye to Illya's hair, transforming it to a dark, dirty brown, going gray around the

temples. The eyebrows were darkened and made to appear bushier, and the eyes underlined to appear baggy. A few lines were skillfully applied to the face, and within fifteen minutes Illya had aged twenty years to the casual observer. When it was over, he stood up and checked himself in a mirror.

"Does he or doesn't he?" he inquired of his image. "Only your U.N.C.L.E. agent knows for sure."

His handiwork on Illya completed, Napoleon searched through the unconscious man's pockets. They revealed little except that the man's name was Rudolph Salzwasser and that he was a Thrush. Illya pocketed the wallet, identity card, and Thrush communicator.

"Now we wait, as long as we can," Napoleon said. "If we can hold off long enough, maybe Brattner will get here in time to help."

As if on cue, the Thrush communicator buzzed.

"Better answer it, or they'll get suspicious and maybe pull out without you," Napoleon said.

Illya snapped open the communicator. "Salzwasser here."

"Now what's wrong?" a voice asked. "You called an hour ago and said you'd be here in half an hour."

Wishing they had left Rudolph conscious long enough to get an idea of what his voice sounded like, Illya held the communicator away from his mouth and answered, "I missed the turn-off. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Snap it up. McNulty is getting impatient. He's ready to pilot the thing himself, after the way he lucked out in getting it all the way here yesterday."

Without giving Illya a chance to sign off, the communicator went dead.

"Well, here goes," Illya muttered and climbed into the car and drove off down the road at a leisurely pace. Napoleon recovered his gob of plastic explosive from the middle of the road, tied and gagged Rudolph securely and, with some help from Kerry, dragged him under some bushes.

Ten minutes at a fast walk brought them back to their thicket. The road was much shorter in the daylight. The boat had apparently been waiting for Illya

when he had driven up, for he was already well out into the lake, Rudolph's bulky suitcase clutched in his lap.

Napoleon checked his tracer and discovered that it was no longer picking up anything. Evidently Sanders was on board the dirigible. He hoped Brattner could get there faster than he had promised. It wasn't likely that Illya could get Morthley off the ship without raising an alarm, and once Thrush was alerted, the odds against the U.N.C.L.E. agents would be formidable. A less optimistic man would have said overwhelming.

Chapter 11

"Well, If It Isn't Mr Kuryakin Again"

A large metal hook appeared with startling suddenness in the air a few yards in front of the boat. As Illya watched, it lowered until it almost touched the water. He could see a steel cable extending upward and disappearing mysteriously about ten feet above the water.

The operator of the boat motioned toward the hook as they pulled alongside it. "Hang your bag on the hook, put your foot in it like a stirrup, and get a grip on the cable. You'll be hauled up."

Illya stared thoughtfully at the cable, which rose straight up and disappeared into thin air. "Shouldn't someone be playing a flute?" he murmured as he followed instructions. "With a snake charmer waiting in the wings?"

The cable started to rise.

A few seconds later, everything went black. Even though he had expected it, he almost tumbled off his perch. The sun was gone, the water, the shore, even the cable and his clenched hands. His invisible body was being pulled by an invisible force to an invisible destination. A wave of dizziness swept him.

Then there was again illumination as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. Above him he could make out a cluster of lights. As he was drawn nearer, he realized that some of the lights came from the control gondola, while the one directly above him must emanate from inside the dirigible itself. He could see the dirigible only as a vast bulk, fading away into the darkness away from the lights. The light above him became brighter and he could recognize what appeared to be tremendous bomb bay doors yawning above him. The clatter of a winch came to him. As he passed the doors there was a loud humming sound and he saw the doors begin to close beneath him. The cable halted as they swung shut.

"You can step off now," a voice came from a platform overhead. Illya stepped off the hook onto the closed doors and picked up his suitcase. As he looked around, he realized what the doors were: aircraft hangar doors. The United States had made at least one ship like this, which could carry, launch, and pick up three fighter planes; evidently the Germans had produced a similar design.

He considered what Thrush could do with this much invisible transportation. Fortunately, modern fighter planes were larger than those of the 1930's, so the hangar where he stood could not readily be used for its original purpose. But it could, he thought, be easily adapted for use as a bomb bay. He thought about the dirigible hovering invisibly over Washington, D.C. with a cargo of plague germs, and shuddered.

"Rudolph Salzwasser?" A large man with a gold earring in his left ear and his right arm in a sling approached. When Illya nodded, the man picked up the suitcase with his good hand and motioned Illya to follow him.

"My name is Hunter," the man said over his shoulder as he led the way up some steps. "We have some temporary quarters set up for you just back of the control gondola. According to McNulty, they used to be crew's quarters; they're not in bad shape when you consider this thing is probably forty years old."

Illya muttered noncommittal sounds to indicate he was listening, and took careful note of his surroundings. Looking back from the top of the steps, he could see over the edge of the platform, to where a large winch had begun to feed out the cable again. The winch operator had apparently just thrown a large switch which operated the hangar doors; they were beginning to open.

Hastily, he moved to overtake Hunter, who was still moving forward and idly conversing. "...probably had a bad few moments coming up," he was saying as Illya came up beside him. "You get used to it after a few times, though."

Illya muttered assent. This must be the keel, he thought. Now they were on a narrow metal catwalk. Surrounding them, in inverted triangles, were rows of metal girders. The girders, with their lacy Swiss cheese appearance, had a look of delicacy about them, as did almost everything about the dirigible

except for the hangar doors and the winch platform. The design provided maximum rigidity with minimum weight, but it had a certain fairy-tale look about it. Between the girders were metal tanks of all shapes and sizes. Some probably contained spare helium under pressure, he supposed, while others could be fuel. He saw no evidence of sandbags, and wondered where the one that had nearly dropped on Lavell had come from.

Now the catwalk and girders were replaced by an almost conventional hallway with a half dozen doors opening on either side. Hunter led the way to the first door on the right. "You can have this one," he said, opening the door. "There aren't many of us on board so we can each have our own room. The air force gets the best of everything," he added sardonically. "Down in the sub they're packed in like sardines."

Illya stepped into the room behind Hunter. It was a small spartanly furnished cubicle with a pair of double bunks along the outer wall and a single chair and table in the middle of the floor. The section of wall beyond the head of the bunks was clear glass. Illya noted that the partitions dividing this room from the next didn't match the rest of the construction, as if they had been added later.

"I understand a Mr. McNulty is in charge of the operation," Illya said. "I would like to see him, please..."

Hunter's rumbling chuckle sounded. "McNulty likes to think he's in charge. Ivan Forbes, head of the Milwaukee Satrapy is in charge of the operation, but he's gone on ahead. Right McNulty is down in the sub overseeing the transfer of the sonar equipment, so you take orders from me."

Illya kept an indifferent expression on his face and nodded. Apparently Rudolph was expected to know about the sonar.

"Now then, unless you'd prefer to rest for a bit, we'll take a look at the control room."

"Ja," Illya replied. "I'm quite anxious to become familiar with the operation. I understand we do not have much time...?"

Hunter took the bait. "Very little. If we can get the sonar installed today, we'll start moving this evening. You'll be expected to give us some

instructions on handling the dirigible; we've been having a few problems. That ass McNulty—" He broke off abruptly.

"Good, good," Illya said. "It sounds like an efficient operation. Shall we go forward?"

"Follow me," Hunter said as he went out into the hallway, through another small compartmented section, slid back a door that blocked the end of the hallway, and went down a short flight of steps. "The control gondola," he announced as Illya followed him down the steps and let the door slide shut behind him.

The area, about twenty feet long by ten feet wide, was bare of any decoration. The front third seemed to contain all the controls, although from Illya's position at the rear he could see only a few items, including a pair of wheels that looked as if they belonged on a small sailing ship. The entire curving front of the gondola was glass, with the roof supported by braces that seemed to have been built from a giant's erector set.

One of the crew was inspecting something near one of the control wheels. The back two thirds of the gondola was completely bare except for a huge box-like metal affair, a good six feet square and three feet deep, with dials and controls clustered on the front of it. A wispy, white-haired man stood in front of the machine, watching the dials.

Luck, Illya realized, seemed to be running his way for a change. Dr Morthley was already located and the only Thrush who could identify him was on the submarine. "Ach, this must be the invisibility device," he said heartily, moving forward. "Fascinating, utterly fascinating! How does it work?"

He reached Morthley's side and clapped him solidly on the back. Morthley looked up annoyed. "I'm an inventor, not a lecturer," he snapped. "Get McNulty to explain it to you; he likes to talk."

The door at the rear of the gondola opened. Illya turned, noted that the man standing in the entrance was the elderly caretaker of the dirigible hangar. He hastily turned back and peered at the OTSMID with feigned eagerness.

"McNulty says he's got to see you right away," Sanders said to Hunter.

"Now what?" muttered Hunter in annoyance. He turned to Illya. "Take your time and familiarize yourself with the invisibility device," he instructed. "I'll be back as soon as possible." He and Sanders vanished up the stairway.

Illya whispered urgently to Dr Morthley, "Come with me, please," and led the scientist toward the rear, away from the man who was still puttering around the controls. "I'm Illya Kuryakin," he began, "and—"

Dr Morthley's face lightened in recognition. "Ah, the U.N.C.L.E. agent, he whispered. "I thought you looked familiar, but I saw you so briefly in that hotel room..."

"Is there any way out of here besides those hangar doors?" Illya asked.

Dr Morthley nodded to a dimly-lit spot in the shadow of the OTSMID. "There's a door, right there, but we must be a hundred yards in the air."

"We have ways," Illya said, and nodded at the man at the front of the gondola. "What's he doing?"

"I think he's the sonar man. He's either looking for a good place to install it or he's trying to look so busy that he won't be called on to help McNulty move the thing."

Illya nodded thoughtfully. So far the man had not looked up from his work since Illya had entered. After a second, Illya tiptoed up the steps to the rear door, opened it a crack and peered through. Seeing no one, he let it slide noisily shut, then strode to the front of the gondola. "They're bringing the sonar aboard," he said crisply. "McNulty wants you back in the hangar."

Sighing, the man put down a wrench and headed for the stairs. As he passed Illya, the latter chopped him neatly at the base of the neck, caught him as he doubled up, and eased him to the floor. Wasting no time, Illya ran to the door Dr Morthley had indicated and twisted it open. From inside his shirt pocket he pulled a duplicate of the miniature wire and grapnel that he and Napoleon had used to cross the fence surrounding the dirigible hangar. He fastened the grapnel firmly to a girder, let the wire dangle outside the door, and produced two pairs of leather gloves. He handed one pair to Dr Morthley.

"Put these on, then grab that wire, and slide," Illya told him. "You may have to drop a few feet into the water, but not far. Can you swim?"

Morthley nodded.

"Fine. Get your shoes off." Illya had kicked off his own oxfords. "When you hit the water, head for shore. Napoleon Solo and your niece will be there to give you a hand."

"How very interesting," came a voice from behind them. Illya whirled, to confront McNulty, Hunter and Sanders. Hunter and McNulty held automatic pistols, but it was the old Ithaca double-barreled pistol, held lovingly by Sander that made Illya hesitate to do anything rash.

McNulty was smiling broadly. "Well, if it isn't Mr Kuryakin again. Do close the door like a good fellow and step over this way."

* * *

Napoleon looked irritably at his watch. Brattner should have been here by now. One U.N.C.L.E. Special, even with shoulder stock, wasn't going to provide much covering fire against a dirigible and a submarine. He wished he'd brought his Gyrojet rocket pistol along. Even if it wasn't very accurate, a dirigible was a pretty big target.

He looked at his watch again. I had been over an hour since Illya had disappeared into the sky on that hook. The submarine had appeared again, transferred cargo to the dirigible, and resubmerged, but there was no sound from Illya's communicator.

Suddenly the communicator beeped and simultaneously Kerry was pounding him on the shoulder and shouting, "They're coming!" Napoleon looked up in time to see a man appear in midair, apparently sliding down some invisible support. A second figure was already in the water. Shots sounded from somewhere overhead.

"It's Uncle Willard!" Kerry shouted. "I saw his white hair!"

"Napoleon!" Illya's voice, sounding slightly muffled, came from the communicator. "We'll head for the pier. They're going to be after us; get out there to pull us out."

Napoleon leaped from the thicket, followed by Kerry. He motioned her back, but didn't have time to argue when she failed to obey. A third figure had appeared, lowered from thin air by the giant hook. He was holding on to the cable with one hand and firing at the fugitives with the other. He didn't appear to be a very good shot. The water began to roil, marking the emergence of the submarine.

Napoleon reached the end of the pier before the two in the water did, and was waiting to pull them out. He wondered for a moment how Illya had managed to keep Rudolph's little cap tightly on his head throughout the affair, as he knelt down to haul up the first swimmer. The man grasped his hand and then suddenly swung his feet up against the pier. Napoleon had a split second to realize that the suddenly upturned face was not that of Illya; then he was flying through the air. He managed to retain control of his gun as he floundered in the water, but when he managed to come upright and facing the pier he was also facing Ezra Sanders and the twin muzzles of the old Ithaca. McNulty, cap discarded, was holding Kerry.

"Mr Solo and Miss Griffin," McNulty said. "I think this more than makes up for my unimaginative method of capturing you and Mr Kuryakin the other day. And to think my parents always told me that my ability as a mimic had no practical value!"

* * *

Sometime later, McNulty finished fastening the handcuffs to the frame of the bunk and stepped back to admire his handiwork. From the lower bunk, Illya watched interestedly. "I hope you don't mind taking the upper bunk," he remarked, "but after all, I was here first." McNulty chuckled appreciatively and left. Sanders spat a stream of tobacco juice on the deck and followed.

Illya raised up as much as his handcuffs would allow and asked, "Did Kerry get away?"

"No, she's in another room. Also, they found the real Rudolph and brought him on board. What are they up to, anyway?"

"I don't know, but they're planning a long trip. They're taking sonar equipment from the submarine and installing it in the dirigible." Napoleon looked surprised, and Illya explained. "It won't work very well in the air; response will be very slow, and the range will be limited. I wouldn't have thought it could be adapted at all, but they seem quite confident about it. Of course, they won't be moving very fast, and there really isn't very much up here that they can run into, as long as they stay out of mountains. They can shut off the invisibility occasionally, in order to see where they are, since they can't navigate by sonar."

"But where are they going?"

"I wish I know. McNulty was crowing about pulling off the coup of the century, and Hunter was making snide comments; I gathered that dropping the sandbag on Lavell was due to one of McNulty's errors, and Hunter isn't about to let him forget it. They were using the sandbags as dummy bombs, but I gather that with no bombsight and with McNulty tripping over things, the practice bomb run was a complete fiasco, so McNulty came up with this other idea. But they didn't say what it was or where they were going."

"Is Forbes around? McNulty seems to be bossing the show."

"They said Forbes had gone on ahead, wherever that is. Apparently he trusts McNulty to move the dirigible."

Napoleon signed and lay back on his bunk. "You don't happen to have a file or a tiny hacksaw in your shoe, do you?"

"I don't even have a shoe." Illya wiggled his toes in proof. "McNulty may drop an occasional sandbag, but he is extremely efficient when it comes to searching people."

"Yes, I found that out, Too. I suppose our best bet is to catch up on our rest. We'll want to be at our best when we reach our destination."

* * *

They reached their destination after dark on the fourth day of travel. The dirigible, with invisibility field off and engines silent, drifted slowly downward into a clearing on a tropical plateau near a range of mountains.

In the light from a few electric bulbs and dozens of torches scattered around the clearing. Napoleon and Illya could see one large building and several smaller structures. Men on the ground grabbed for lines dangling from the dirigible's descent, but their tugging was enough to maneuver the aerial giant so that it settled with its nose and control gondola near the large building and its length stretched along an open area which appeared to have been recently hacked out of the tropical forest.

"San Sebastian!" Napoleon exclaimed, recognizing the large building below them as the fortress-like three-story structure which was Thrush headquarters in that country. The smaller buildings had been used as barracks for the Thrush mercenaries fighting in the Army of Liberation of Ferdinand Pessina.

There was a light tremor as the bumping bag under the control gondola came to rest on the roof of one of the barracks. The soldiers scurried about with the lines, looking for convenient hitching posts. With no mooring mast available, the ropes were fastened to whatever buildings and trees they would reach. Seconds later, the door to Napoleon's and Illya's room opened and McNulty, Hunter, and a crew member entered. At a gesture from McNulty, the crewman stepped forward and released them from their bunks, while Hunter stood watchfully, gun in hand. Using one of the pairs of handcuffs, he fastened Napoleons right wrist to Illya's left.

"I suppose you've recognized our destination," McNulty said. "I understand you two were here once before and escaped. You may find it harder to do, this time."

Napoleon shrugged. "We do our best."

"I don't think your best will be good enough. Now that I'm here with the dirigible, San Sebastian will belong to Thrush in a matter of hours, with a minimum of blood, sweat and tears—I don't mind the blood but I object to work through that ridiculous idealist, Pessina."

"McNulty, you talk too much," said Hunter.

"That's all right." McNulty smiled at the two U.N.C.L.E. agents. "You wouldn't repeat anything I've said, would you? Now then, you should know the way to the cells in the headquarters building; they'll constitute your

home away from home until Forbes gets a chance to question you. Walk slowly and try not to think too much about escape. I hate to see people disappeared."

Chapter 12

"I Never Sabotaged a Dirigible Before"

Napoleon and Illya sat gloomily in their cell. They had occupied the same cell less than two weeks before, but then they had been equipped with a coil of thin, tough wire with which to saw through the bars, shirt buttons which were in reality tiny gas grenades, and other well-tested U.N.C.L.E. equipment. Now they had nothing but their hands and wits.

"I wonder what the San Sebastian contingent has been up to since we left." Napoleon asked.

"Dirigible watching, I hope," Illya replied.

"I'm amazed Thrush didn't move their headquarters after we escaped. It seems careless of them to remain after their security had been breached. For that matter, I'm surprised that El Presidente hasn't flattened the place; he does have an air force."

"Of dubious loyalty," Illya pointed out. "Quite possibly, however, El Presidente doesn't know about this place. Mr Waverly wasn't at all happy about supporting El Presidente; perhaps he still hopes to get Pessina out from under Thrush domination. In which case..."

"Spare me the speculation on Mr Waverly's methods of intrigue," Napoleon broke in. "I'm content to realize that he usually knows what he's doing, even though I seldom do."

"In any case," Illya continued, "remember that Latin America has been having a population explosion second to none. Really good bases in isolated areas are getting hard to find; except in the Amazon Basin, isolated areas are hard to find. Quite possibly they haven't moved because they don't have any place to move to, and they feel capable of protecting this place. They certainly know that they have far more men in San Sebastian than we do, and I doubt if they worry much about El Presidente getting this far from Cerro Bueno."

There was a metallic sound and a small object dropped into the cell. Illya picked it up and discovered it was a miniature grapnel, a twin to the one he had been using, attached to a length of monofilament line. He peered out the cell window, but could see nothing. He looked at Napoleon.

"I suggest," said Napoleon, "that we haul it in and see if there is anything on the other end."

There was: a bundle so large that Napoleon had some trouble in wedging it between the bars. Most of the bulk consisted of two sets of native clothing. Inside the clothing were various small metallic items, including knives, a picklock and a pen-type tear gas gun, and a not reading, "The guard will be called away in ten minutes. Meet me behind the northwest barracks in fifteen." It was unsigned.

Napoleon smiled in satisfaction. "Apparently one reason why Thrush headquarters has not been molested is that the local U.N.C.L.E. group prefers infiltration."

"Luckily for us," Illya said, beginning to strip off his clothing. Napoleon looked with some distaste at the ragged native pants and shirt, but followed suit. After changing clothes, he applied himself to the lock of the cell, and was rewarded by hearing it click open. Carefully keeping the door closed, he turned to Illya, who was stuffing his discarded clothing under the blanket that covered the bunk. Illya looked up and shrugged. "So it's an old trick; do have any better suggestions?"

After a moment's consideration, Napoleon walked over and stuffed his clothing under the blanket on the upper bunk.

"What's the guard doing?" Illya asked.

"Sitting on a chair near the head of the stairs, with a shotgun on his lap. He seems to be reading something; he's certainly not paying any attention to the cells." He walked back to the cell door. "He's gone. Let's move."

They eased the cell door open as quietly as possible, slipped through, and eased it shut again. Napoleon hesitated a moment, then relocked the door. Their cell was midway down the corridor. As they recalled from their last incarceration, there was only one stairway to the floor; the guard had been

sitting in front of it. They hastened down the corridor, noting that the other cells were empty. The stairway was similarly empty, and they hastened down to the second floor of the building. From here they had a choice of exits.

"I suggest the back way," said Napoleon, and they hurried down a long, bare hall.

"The place seems remarkably deserted," remarked Illya as they reached the rear stairway.

"Yes, I've been wondering about that. It wasn't this easy the last time, even with the gas grenades." Napoleon halted suddenly as a pair of Thrushes ran past the foot of the stairway. He peered around the corner to find the lower hall bristling with activity, and drew back. "Now we know where everybody is. I wonder what stirred them up?"

Checking again, he found a momentary lull in the action. "Now's our chance; come on!" The U.N.C.L.E. agents slipped across the hall and out the back door.

The activity seemed equally frenzied outside, but here there were more people affecting the ragged peon garments, and nobody paid any attention to two additional peons who moved briskly to the rear of the northwest barracks. Once beyond the corner of the building they were beyond the furor of the central area; the clearing at the rear was totally deserted. "We're here," Illya said, "but where is our unknown benefactor?"

He received no answer for several minutes. Both agents were becoming increasingly nervous; at any moment a Thrush might wander around the corner of the building and spot them. Napoleon had almost decided to abandon the waiting and try to get away on their own when a figure emerged from the edge of the forest and motioned them to come. They followed him down a little-used path until he stopped, a good distance away from the clearing.

"Mr Solo? Mr Kuryakin?" They nodded. "I am Ishmael Gallinas y Sotavento," the man said. "I work for the local U.N.C.L.E. headquarters." He smiled deprecatingly. "I am only an interpreter, not a regular agent, but

when U.N.C.L.E. needed to infiltrate Thrush headquarters, I had the right sort of contacts and background."

"What's all the excitement about?" Napoleon asked. "I hope it isn't McNulty putting his master plan into operation already. We need time to get more equipment."

"I am not sure, senor. As I said, I am not used to information-gathering, and I fear I am not very good at it. However, the activity seems to center about the dirigible. They are loading men with parachutes into it, and I heard the man called Forbes urging them to hurry, because they had to move while they still had good weather. It is usually quite rainy here at this time of year. I have not discovered where they are going. But surely, they cannot get far. El Presidente's air force will shoot this slow dirigible out of the sky."

"I'm afraid El Presidente's air force will have a hard time finding this dirigible," Illya commented. Sotavento looked blank.

"It looks as if this is McNulty's master plan," Napoleon said. "Do you know how many men are being loaded?"

"I do not know the exact number of the crew. But there are fifty Thrushes with parachutes, submachine guns, and hand grenades. I heard McNulty say that with these men Thrush could take the place without any trouble."

"Take the place," Napoleon mused. "Now what place could they take that would automatically assure them of control of the country? I can think of only one."

Illya nodded. "Fifty fully armed Thrushes, appearing out of a clear sky inside El Presidente's fortress. The elite guard at the fortress would never know what hit it. McNulty just might make good on this one."

"Can you get in touch with U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in Cerro Bueno?" Napoleon asked.

"Si; it is not safe to carry an U.N.C.L.E. communicator in this place, but I have two Thrush communicators, adjusted to operate on a special wavelength that Cerro Bueno is monitoring." Ishmael held up the communicators, smiling. "If it is discovered, why, they are merely defective

communicators, and I am a poor peon who is not intelligent enough to understand that I have faulty equipment."

"Very good," Napoleon said. "Now, what about the other two prisoners? The girl and the old man?"

"Other prisoners?" Ishmael shook his head. "I saw no other prisoners. But then, when I saw you and Señor, I followed to see which cell you would be placed into, and then I left to gather the materials for your escape. Perhaps the other prisoners were taken from the dirigible later."

"We have to get them out somehow," Illya said. "We have an obligation to Kerry; and as long as she and Dr Morthley are in Thrush's hands, even if we destroy the existing OTSMID; they can force him to build them another one."

"We seem to be confronted with a dilemma," Napoleon observed. "Which way do we jump? I don't think that notifying the local U.N.C.L.E. headquarters will do much good. They certainly won't be able to convince El Presidente that an invisible dirigible is going to dump fifty paratroopers on his head within an hour or two. And there certainly aren't enough local agents to stop something like that by themselves. On the other hand, the best time to get Kerry and Dr Morthley away from Thrush is before they discover that we've escaped."

"Ishmael said they were loading the paratroopers already," Illya reminded him. "We don't have much time to choose."

Napoleon nodded and turned to Ishmael. "We'll have to knock out the dirigible. How would you go about it, Illya?"

"I don't know; I never sabotaged a dirigible before. But I'd suggest that the first step would be to get on board."

Napoleon began giving Ishmael instructions. "It is of the utmost importance that the other prisoners are located and helped to escape. Notify U.N.C.L.E. and see if they can give you any help. If not, try to get them out yourself, any way you can. Let us have one of your special communicators, so we can keep in touch with you. If we succeed, we'll try to get back to give you a hand. When you contact Cerro Bueno, tell them about the invisible

dirigible. If they don't believe you, have them contact Mr Waverly in New York. He knows about it."

Ishmael nodded reluctantly. "I will do the best that a poor interpreter can," he said as Napoleon and Illya started back down the path toward the dirigible.

* * *

Five minutes later, the two agents were peering cautiously out of the undergrowth that lined the clearing in which the dirigible rested. The tail section towered over them, and they could see Thrushes swarming about the control gondola, almost a city block away.

Napoleon looked up. The body of the ship was a good dozen feet off the ground. "How do we get in if we can't reach it?" he asked.

Let's get a little nearer the front. Maybe something will occur to us." Illya moved forward, keeping out of sight in the trees and bushes as he went.

After a minute, Illya paused and held up his hand to caution Napoleon to stop. "Here we are," he said, gesturing upward. "We couldn't ask for anything more convenient. Just follow me up the tree." An engine gondola hung fifteen feet in the air, mashing down the middle branches of a medium-sized tree.

"What is it with you and trees?" Napoleon asked resentfully, but he followed Illya into the branches. Without undue acrobatics, Illya eased himself down onto the top of the gondola, then looked toward the Thrush activity that was still a good three hundred feet in front of them. After a second, he motioned Napoleon to follow him.

Pulling a knife from his shirt and placing it in his teeth, Illya started up one of the metal struts that held the engine gondola to the body of the dirigible. In a short time he had himself braced among the struts and was inspecting the surface. He tapped it with his fingers and muttered something that Napoleon couldn't catch. Then he took the knife from his teeth and poked with it. After a few unsuccessful jabs, he returned the knife to his teeth and descended.

"I was afraid of that," he explained as he stepped down next to Napoleon. "Around the engine mountings, they cover everything with metal."

Napoleon nobly refrained from commenting. "How far does the metal extend?" he asked, eyeing the other areas the engine struts were attached to.

"As far as we can reach, at least. It's put on to keep gunk from the engine from damaging the fabric." Illya looked around, trying to locate an available entrance. Something caught his eye. "Maybe we're in luck after all," he said and started moving along the horizontal struts to a different area, keeping a careful watch to the front as he went. Finally he crouched low and eased the last few feet to the dirigible body. Holding to a strut over his head with one hand, he took the knife with the other and carefully placed it, point first, against a point on the metal covered fabric. "Pity Ishmael didn't supply us with screwdrivers, along with the other stuff," he said.

After a moment's effort, the knife turned. Illya carefully unscrewed something, moved the knife to a second spot and repeated the performance.

Napoleon watched for some time, then edged out on the struts. "If you're planning to unscrew the engine, let me know and I'll get off."

Illya carefully fitted the knife into another screw head. "As long as you're here, make yourself useful. Reach over my shoulder and hold this thing in place while I get the last screw out."

Napoleon obediently stretched his arm out and placed his hand where Illya indicated. Another half dozen turns of the knife, and he found himself precariously balancing a round metal plate about two feet in diameter. "What is it?" he asked as Illya put the knife away and grasped the plate.

"An inspection hatch," Illya told him. "There are probably a dozen of them around, but this one will be sufficient." He leaned down, dangled the plate for a second, then dropped it with a small thud onto the grass below. "Now let's get inside; they're getting ready to cast off."

The two agents eased through and found themselves in total darkness. "We must be near the keel," Illya whispered. "We'd better get a grip on the girders and work our way up before some wandering Thrush spots us."

"I have a grip and I intend to keep it for awhile," Napoleon said. "Isn't there something we can do right here?"

"Not much. Don't forget that helium is lighter than air so it won't leak out through a hole in the bottom. We have to make out hole in the top of the bags if we want to sink this ship of the air." Illya paused for a moment before continuing. "Some old Russian dirigible lore is coming back to me." Perhaps we won't have to cut any holes."

"Don't tell me there are inspection hatches on the gas bags?"

"Something even handier, if we can find it: valves. They were used to adjust the buoyancy. These engines burned a lot of fuel and on long trips the loss of weight sometimes had to be compensated for."

"Isn't that a rather expensive way? Helium isn't the cheapest gas in the world."

"Necessity knows no expense—old Russian proverb. Besides, this is an old German airship, designed for use with hydrogen. Too bad they aren't still using hydrogen in her; one well placed tracer bullet and the whole thing would go up in flames."

"Your fast store of knowledge is amazing," Napoleon said. "However, I seem to have detected a concealed assumption in your reasoning; we can use the valves *if* we can find them."

"You missed an earlier assumption," Illya replied. "We can probably find the valves *if* we can get to the top of gas bags. Shall we start moving?"

Chapter 13

"There Must Be an Operator's Manual In Here Somewhere"

Napoleon hesitantly released one of the girders and reached upward. After a second, he located another handhold and decided he could risk moving one of his feet. As he cautiously lifted his foot and felt about for something solid to put it on, Illya voice came from several feet above him.

"Come on up. There's a catwalk up here, and I think there's some light about a hundred feet toward the front."

Napoleon said nothing, only concentrated on climbing. After a minute, he was standing relatively upright on what felt like a metal strip about a foot wide. Looking toward the forward end of the dirigible, he could make out a faint blob of light. A few feet in front of him, something—presumably Illya—was fuzzily outlined against it.

"I'm here," Napoleon announced. "Keep in mind that despite what we're standing on, I'm not a cat."

"Just follow me. There are plenty of handholds on both sides. The netting around the gas bags is probably the safest thing to grab for in moments of panic, however. Less likely to damage yourself on that than on the outer frame. And remember, if you miss the frame, you can fall right through the fabric covering."

"I'm touched by your concern. Where are we going?"

"Up to the nose and back down through the center if we're lucky," Illya said.

"Down the center? The keel, you mean? We just left that."

"No, the center. The gas bags are probably doughnut shaped and if they are, there will be a catwalk right through the center, from nose to tail. Somewhere along it, there should be a ladder going up. And there should be at least one other catwalk along the top of the gas bags."

"You make this thing sound like a floating briar patch."

"Most dirigibles were. Let's just hope Brer Thrush doesn't spot us and follow us in."

The blob of light was bigger now, and they could see a second one further down where the shell started curving in toward the nose. Soon they reached the first area of light. It was coming faintly from the open space between tow gas bags.

The two agents halted, and Illya peered cautiously around the main-frame girders that marked the division between the bags. After a second, he moved quickly across and motioned Napoleon to do the same.

Napoleon glanced around the edge of the bag and quickly joined Illya in the shadow of the next one. "It looks like a bicycle wheel for the Jolly Green Giant," he remarked as they moved on.

"It works on somewhat the same principle," Illya replied. "Those wires do most of the work in holding the ship rigid."

A swaying motion cut off any further information. "Going up," Illya announced. He stopped, took the knife from his pants pocket, braced himself against the lighter girders of one of the intermediate frames, and sawed a slit in the outer fabric. Returning the knife to his pocket, he widened the slit with his fingers and peered out. "They have most of the mooring lines loose," he said. "We'll be on our way any minute."

Napoleon gave Illya a hand in getting back onto the catwalk. "Can we find those valves soon enough?" he asked. "El Presidente's palace in Cerro Bueno isn't too far from here, as the dirigible flies."

"If we don't find them, we can start cutting holes in the bags."

The agents started along the catwalk again. They passed another main frame, this one unlighted, and then came to the second blob of light. As before, Illya peer cautiously around the corner before crossing the lighted area. As then moved ahead again, he whispered over his shoulder, "That's probably the light above the control gondola. Any ladders from the center to the upper catwalk will probably be there."

Napoleon remained silent. As they continued moving forward, the curve became more pronounced and soon they were surrounded by darkness. The

agents slowed their pace and Illya made sure of his footing before each step.

"At this rate," Napoleon said, "our friends will be over Cerro Bueno before we find the nose of the dirigible."

"Lead the way, if you want to move faster," Illya retorted. "Just remember, this thing has just made its first flight in over thirty years. I want to be sure the catwalk is really there before I step on it."

Another tremor silenced them. Illya paused to cut another slit and peer out for a second. "They're lifting," he announced.

At that moment the engines came to life, and the agents could feel the gentle forward movement that passed for acceleration in a dirigible. They moved along the catwalk again until they reached a main frame which apparently coincided with the location of the control gondola. Here there was a ladder, running from the keel to, they hoped, a catwalk at the top.

Illya inspected the ladder briefly, then stepped out on it and began to climb. Napoleon followed.

"We aren't likely to run into any crew members, are we?" Napoleon asked. "I feel somewhat exposed out here."

"Not likely. There's very little need to inspect the gas bags in flight, normally, and since they seem to be running with a skeleton crew, they'll probably have little time for such niceties."

The climb took less than a minute and was relatively quiet. Now that the dirigible was moving forward, the tremors had subsided and the upper catwalk seemed a steady platform. They could see a single, dim light bulb glowing about a hundred feet toward the stern. The outer covering was visible through the girders only a foot over their heads.

"What do these valves that we're supposed to be finding look like?" Napoleon asked.

"My dirigible lore doesn't go that far. Presumably they look like valves. They'd have to be pretty big—perhaps several inches across. And they would have to be attached to either electric wires or control cables so they

could be operated from the control room. Electric operators would be my guess, but I couldn't say what a German engineer in the 1920's would pick. They should be located fairly close to the catwalk so they could be inspected."

"If they're very far from that light just ahead, we're going to have to feel for them."

"If we don't find them soon, we can start stabbing at the gas bags, and— Did that light flicker just then?"

As if it had been waiting for them to give it a cur, the light went out. Both agents froze in their tracks, then slowly turned to look back along the catwalk. There was not even a distant glow.

"Why should they black out the ship in flight?" Napoleon asked.

"They don't normally. Must be an electrical failure. Can you hear the engines?"

Napoleon listened form a second. "I think so. If the failure is in the control gondola, do you suppose the OTSMID is dead, too?"

"We'll see. Don't jar me in the next minute," Illya said. There was the sound of metal on metal, then a series of cutting noises.

Illya's voice came again. "There's no light at all outside, and the moon was out when we got in here. The OTSMID must still be functioning."

Napoleon thought for a moment. "We'd better give up on finding the valves. Let me strike a match and we'll see about puncturing a few gas bags." He pulled a battered matchbook from his pocket, extracted a match, carefully felt for the striking surface, and deftly scraped the match head across the surface.

Nothing happened.

Muttering about Central American matches, Napoleon located the striking surface again, in preparation for a second attempt. Just as he touched the match to the striking surface, pain shot through his fingers. Stifling a yell, he dropped it and shook his hand violently.

"That thing was lit!" he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper.

"Lit?" Illya's voice came from a foot away. "You're sure?"

"My fingers are sure."

Illya thought for a second. "I'm tempted to ask what does it all mean, but I suspect that I know."

Napoleon agreed. "The OTSMID is working and the nullifier isn't. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"It suggests we aren't going to locate the gas valves."

Napoleon considered the situation. "I think it's worth a gamble. If the nullifier comes back on, the chances are that we will either be in control of the ship, or we won't have gotten far enough along to be trapped. And if we could get control of the ship..."

"Let's get moving, then. Reaching the control gondola without seeing it will be a problem. Keep feeling for that ladder; if we miss it we're stuck up here." On their hands and knees, the agents crawled along the catwalk, feeling the empty space to their right every few inches to make they could touch the ladder when they came to it.

Once they reached the ladder, it was no more difficult to descend in the total blackness than it had been to ascend in the light. As they reached the relatively firm footing of the keel, they could hear the buzz of excited conversation coming from the area of the stern. Over of the general turmoil, they could make out two or three voices coming from almost directly beneath them. No words could be distinguished.

"There they are," Napoleon whispered. "How do we get at them?"

"There should be a hatch near the bottom of the ladder," Illya whispered back. "Feel for it. If we can find it, it should let us down just back of the control room where they had the OTSMID."

Both agents dropped to their knees and began running their hands rapidly around the surface of the keel. "Here it is," Napoleon said after a few minutes.

Illya crawled across the Napoleon and ran hand down Napoleon's arm until he felt the break in the metal that outlined the hatch.

"When we drop," Napoleon said, "you stay where you land, and flatten anyone who comes in or out. I'll take care of the men inside. Don't move any further than you can help; my only advantage will be that I know that anyone I run into is an enemy."

"And after we've seized the ship?"

"As long as we can keep anyone from turning the nullifier back on, we'll have plenty of time to decide what to do. Those paratroops back there aren't going to jump blind." He twisted the latch and lifted the trap door.

As the trap door opened, Hunter's voice came booming through. "When are you going to get that thing fixed, anyway?"

Another voice, which both agents recognized as McNulty's replied. "I don't know. The only one who knows this thing is Dr Morthley, and we left him back at headquarters. All I can do is keep reducing power to the field; I'm not even sure it was the attempt to expand the field that did the damage. For all I know, Morthley sabotaged the machine somehow."

"You were the one who told Forbes you could operate this rig," Hunter said accusingly.

"I said I knew how to work the controls; I didn't say Morthley had given me a course in field maintenance and repair. If you want to try your hand at running this thing by feel, come on over."

There was the sound of someone coming down the steps that led up and back to the main cargo and passenger area of dirigible. "Who's that?" Hunter asked.

"Sanders," came the reply. "The boys back there are still worried, but I told them if an old man like me wasn't afraid of the dark, they didn't need to be." He cackled. "They'll jump when you give the word. When are you going to get the lights back on, anyway?"

Napoleon waited until Sanders' voice passed beneath him, then dropped through the hatch as quietly as possible. He moved forward to get out of Illya's way, then stopped to listen. Sanders' question started Hunter and McNulty quarreling again and Sander, from the sound of the breathing, had stopped moving at the same time he stopped talking. Behind him, Napoleon

heard a light thud, presumably Illya dropping to the gondola deck. Evidently Sanders heard it, too. "Somebody back there?" he inquired. Napoleon thought about the muzzles of the invisible Ithaca swinging to cover his stomach, and quickly stepped to one side and began to creep forward. At this range, even if Sanders shot blind, he might very well get both U.N.C.L.E. agents. A twin load of buckshot was nothing to fool with. It seemed, however, that Sanders wasn't the nervous type. Napoleon heard him shuffle his feet as he changed position, and then he remarked to the world at large, "There must be some big rats on this ship. I just heard one."

"Probably just ship noises," Hunter said. "This thing creaks like an old windjammer."

"How would you know what a windjammer sounds like?" McNulty said with a sneer.

"Because I've sailed in one, you pipsqueak! You and your antiquities societies...I've done things! All you do is talk about them."

Napoleon smiled. If they would just keep on talking, he could tell where they were and his job would be much easier. He must be close to Sanders now. He reached out, cautiously, and touched the man's back. Sanders started to turn, but Napoleon quickly located the caretaker's neck with his left hand and delivered a solid karate chop with his right. The Ithaca clattered on the deck as Napoleon grabbed Sanders and eased him down. A quick search located the gun and something in one of Sanders' pockets that felt like a Thrush communicator. He pocketed the communicator and stuck the gun through his belt, feeling much safer.

Deciding that any sudden cessation of talk from either Hunter or McNulty would make the other one suspicious, he crept forward toward two other men he could hear talking in low tones near the front of the gondola. He didn't quite make it.

"Sanders, what do you think you're doing?" Hunter demanded, his words coming from a point inches away from Napoleon's face. Napoleon mumbled something he hoped was a passable imitation of Sanders' cracked voice.

"Speak up, dammit!" Hunter yelled.

Accurately gauging the location of the voice, Napoleon chopped Hunter across the throat, then got him with a blow to the back of the neck as he stood strangling. He caught the Thrush as he fell, and relieve him of a pistol and another communicator. After some thought, he put the communicator back; he didn't have room to carry it. He hefted the pistol, then reversed it and gripped it firmly by the barrel as he moved forward again. McNulty had begun to curse the OTSMID, which Napoleon hoped would keep him from noticing that he wasn't getting acid comments from Hunter any more.

Napoleon moved up behind the two men at the front of the gondola, who seemed to be standing and idly talking. Once he ran into something and stopped to rub a painful shin. The voices were close to him now. He crept up behind the nearest one, reached out to touch the man's shoulder, and then swung the pistol at the spot where the head would be. The man collapsed and Napoleon eased him to the floor.

The second man sensed that something was wrong. "Hey, Rudolph, what happened?" he asked. Getting no answer made him more nervous. Napoleon could hear him moving about. "Rudolph? Say something; what's going on?" Napoleon reached to locate the man by feel when the lights suddenly came on. He leaped and swung the pistol; the Thrush collapsed.

Napoleon whirled toward the OTSMID and McNulty. The latter had turned to jeer at Hunter. "If you'd just shut up earlier I could have..." He took in the situation and reached for the pistol in the shoulder holster under his coat, at which point Illya stepped silently behind him and pressed the point of the knife into his ribs. McNulty froze. Napoleon got his pistol reversed and aimed at the Thrush agent, while Illya deftly reached under McNulty's coat and extracted the pistol, exclaiming in surprise as he noted that the gun was his own U.N.C.L.E. Special. He stepped well back, out of range of a sudden gram by McNulty and out of Napoleon's line of fire. Spotting the open door leading to the dirigible body, he ran back and slid it tightly shut.

"Get his communicator," Napoleon said. "And you might frisk him for any secret weapons before you tie him up. We can check these others after we get him put away."

McNulty had a communicator but no obvious weapons. From the unconscious Thrushes, Illya gained three communicators, two more guns, and an assortment of wristwatches. Napoleon stared at the latter booty in some puzzlement. "Aren't you carrying your Russian background a bit far?" he inquired.

"I have seen wristwatches," Illya said, "which contained, among other things, secret cameras, radio receivers and transmitters, electronic equipment, miniature time bombs, and one that could be reassembled into a tiny machine pistol. It was a rather large watch," he added, noting Napoleon's disbelieving stare.

"We'd better try to get the troops out before they send someone up to investigate," Napoleon said. He turned to McNulty. "What was the signal to jump?" he asked.

McNulty glared at him and said nothing. Napoleon glanced around the gondola. His eyes lit on the door. "How high would you say we are?" he asked no one in particular.

Illya thought for a minute, turned several switches on the OTSMID, then walked to the front of the gondola and looked out. "I'd estimate at least a thousand feet," he said. He looked thoughtfully at McNulty. "High enough for a parachute to operate. Too bad we don't have one for you."

Napoleon was studying McNulty with interest. "You could use some of the properties of a real Thrush in about thirty second, if we don't get some information out of you."

McNulty laughed. "You don't scare, U.N.C.L.E. doesn't operate that way."

Napoleon moved over to the door and released the catch. "When he's gone, I suppose we'll just have to make do. Do you think that we could just open that door back there and yell at them?"

"I don't see why not," Illya said. "The communicators could have been affected by the blackout, for all they know. Come on, now, Arpad." Each agent took one of McNulty's arms and urged him toward the open door.

McNulty held back. "Oh, come on, now. We all know that you're not going to push me out. You can't; it isn't civilized. You simply aren't going to do it,

I know you're not. You..." He paused briefly as he faced the opening from a distance of less than a foot. "By George, I believe you would, at that," he decided. "All right, I know when to quit. There's an intercom system up front. You just announce 'Prepare to jump,' then give them a couple of minutes to get the hangar doors open, and say 'Jump' and they jump."

"Very cooperative," Napoleon said, keeping McNulty facing the open door. Illya stepped back to the OTSMID and reversed every switch he had previously thrown. The view of the ground outside the opening was replaced by blackness. He walked to the indicated intercom, studied it for a moment, then flicked a switch and announced, "Prepare to jump."

They could hear a grating sound from somewhere back of the gondola. When it stopped, Illya said "Jump!"

There was a very slight swaying motion as fifty men dropped almost simultaneously through the open hangar doors. "Go check, just to make sure," Napoleon said.

Illya crossed the length of the gondola, pausing for a moment to administer a thump to Sanders, who was beginning to show signs of life. "Tough old bird," he remarked. Checking the body of the dirigible he found no one. Even the man who operated the hangar doors had apparently jumped with the rest; the doors still swung open. Tidily, he closed them and returned to report.

Napoleon nodded in satisfaction. "See if you can find something to tie all these people up. We can't be stopping to crack someone over the head every few minutes."

Rummaging through the storage areas in the gondola, Illya located an assortment of odds and ends including a very large coil of rope. He cut several lengths from the latter and tied up the Thrushes.

"Now then," Napoleon said, "we are approximately a thousand feet up, invisible, and heading in the direction of, first, Cerro Bueno and, second, the Pacific Ocean. What does your dirigible lore say about getting us back to hearth and home?"

Illya looked about the interior of the gondola. "First, I'm going to look for some instructions. There must be an operator's manual somewhere."

Chapter 14

"Hi-Yo, Dirigible!"

After a few minutes, it became obvious that there were no operating instructions aboard.

"Well," Napoleon said as he looked around the control room, "there don't seem to be too many controls. Why don't we try them one at a time and see what happens."

Illya nodded. "I'm sure Arpad will let us know if we start to do anything dangerous; it's his neck as well as ours."

McNulty glared at them.

"And of course," Napoleon said, "if he doesn't cooperate, there's no real reason to leave him around, is there? Why don't we try waking up Hunter? We'll keep the one who cooperates and pitch the other one out the door."

McNulty grimaced. "Very well. A practical man must be governed by the circumstances, which seem to favor you at the moment."

"Fine," Napoleon said. "Now about these controls?"

"Quite simple, really. The wheel in front controls the rudders. The one on the left, facing the side, controls the elevators. The one on the right controls engine speed, and those switches above the elevator wheel releases the ballast. You seem to have figured out the OTSMID for yourself, and presumably you know something about sonar."

"We seem to need more ballast, not less," Illya said. "But I suppose the elevators can get us down...?"

McNulty nodded. "Just turn the wheel clockwise and set the engines at *Slow*."

"That's where they're set now," Napoleon said.

McNulty nodded. "We hoped they were. We had to set them by feel when the nullifier quit on us."

"What happened there, anyway?" Napoleon asked.

"I don't know. We were trying to expand the invisibility field, so the paratroops could jump from a good altitude and still be invisible most of the way down. Morthley had shown me how to work the controls. All at once the nullifier quit."

"Some sort of interaction with the expanding invisibility field," Illya said. He turned elevator wheel slowly. There was a slight shift in the deck beneath them as the dirigible's nose lowered, but nothing else.

"What does the sonar say?" Napoleon asked.

"I can't tell from here," Illya said. "Maybe we'd better shut off the OTSMID until we get some practice on this thing. I don't want to plow into any mountains." He walked over to the OTSMID and fiddled with the controls until the absolute blackness outside the gondola windows was again replaced by moonlight. He checked their progress. "We're going down slightly; still pretty high. Incidentally, hadn't we better get this thing turned around? I have no particular urge to provide target practice for El Presidente's boys."

Napoleon nodded, left the engine controls and approached the rudder controls warily. Several full turns were required before Illya reported that the ship was beginning to turn.

"While you were at it, you might have put in power steering," Napoleon told McNulty.

Suddenly the Thrush communicator in Napoleon's pocket buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket while Illya hastened to McNulty's side and gestured suggestively with his knife. McNulty nodded. Napoleon flipped open the communicator and put his hand over the pickup. Someone was already speaking.

"...what happened. We came down in the jungle. I don't even know where we are. I've just managed to collect the group, and we'd like somebody to get us out of here."

Another voice cut in. "Forbes here. You can't contact the dirigible if the OTSMID is functioning. I'll get some help to you from headquarters. Keep

talking so we can get a fix on you."

The first voice began to swear, steadily and without inflection. After a minute, Forbes cut in again. "You're not more than fifteen mile from headquarters! You say you don't know what happened?"

"No. The lights went out, and Sanders came back and told us it was just a temporary failure and for us to sit tight. Then they came back on, and a couple minutes later we got the orders to jump. We jumped, and we landed here. Couldn't see the trees until we got out of the field and by then we were in them. Worst foul-up I ever saw!"

It was Forbes' turn to swear, and he did it with more feeling. McNulty has done it again! Well, that young man has either failed or double-crossed me once too often. When I get my hands on him, he'll learn a few things about Thrush discipline." Forbes continued at some length on McNulty's failings and his anticipated punishment for them.

On the dirigible, McNulty's faced paled until it resembled old putty.

Finally Forbes broke off his tirade. "We'll try to get a helicopter out to pick you up. Keep your communicator on so we can locate you. We only have the one copter, so we'll have to bring you in a few at a time."

Napoleon put the communicator back in his pocket. "At least we some of the paratroopers are out of the way for a while. If we work fast, we might be able to get Kerry and Dr Morthley out before the bulk of them return. It will take the helicopter some time to find the troops and arrange for a pickup."

McNulty looked up, startled. "You aren't going back to Thrush headquarters!"

"Of course," Napoleon replied. "Why not?"

"Look, I don't want to go anywhere near there. Just give me a parachute and let me jump. I know Forbes, and he meant every word he said. Give me a chance to get out of the country."

Napoleon looked thoughtful. "How bad do you want out, Arpad?"

McNulty shuddered. "You don't know Forbes. I do."

"What are you thinking about, Napoleon?" Illya asked.

"Mainly that two men can't operate the dirigible controls, the sonar, and the OTSMID simultaneously. Now, if we let Arpad loose—without a gun, of course—he could handle one of the controls for us. Would you do that Arpad, in return for being allowed to bail out a good long way from Thrush headquarters when the job is done?"

McNulty nodded eagerly.

"Should we trust him?" asked Illya.

"I think we can trust him with reservations. Don't let him get near your gun. Also, I think we should dispose of temptation in the form of his buddies here." Napoleon gestured to the recumbent forms of the Thrushes lying about the control room. "Arpad, are there any extra parachutes about?"

McNulty nodded. "In the second cabin back, on the left. Most of the crew were a little nervous about our airworthiness, so we brought along parachutes for everybody." It was obvious from his tone that McNulty held no sympathy for those who doubted the virtues of his ship.

While Illya brought the parachutes forward, Napoleon opened the gondola door next to the OTSMID and roused the still sleeping Thrushes. After considerable confusion, Hunter, Sanders, Salzwasser and the unidentified crewman were roused and bundled into the parachute packs.

"All right, gentlemen," Napoleon announced as the last buckle slipped into place, "just step through the door over there and remember to pull your ripcords when you've cleared the ship."

"Wait a minute!" Hunter exclaimed, pointing at McNulty, who was cowering near the front of the gondola. "What about him?"

Napoleon smiled. "I shouldn't be giving away secrets, but I'm sure you'll find out eventually. Arpad is one of our best agents."

Hunter nodded. "I should have guessed it. Nobody could foul up that often unless he did it deliberately. All right," he said to McNulty, "you win this time, but if I ever see you again—"

"At the count of three," Napoleon broke in ominously. "One..."

At the count of three, Hunter, followed closely by Sanders, Rudolph, and the unidentified Thrush jumped.

"That seems to dispose of possible saboteurs," Illya said. "Now we can get down to business."

McNulty came hesitantly toward Napoleon. "Don't you think I'm in enough trouble without your telling Hunter I'm one of your agents?" he asked accusingly.

"No, I don't," Napoleon replied firmly. "The more trouble you're in, the less likely you are to think you can double-cross us and get away with it."

Pulling the returned communicator from his pocket, Napoleon called Ishmael. "This is Solo," he said when the man's voice answered. "Have you located the other prisoners yet?"

Sotavento sounded unhappy. "No Se♦or. They are on the third floor of the headquarters building, but I have not been able to find out which cell."

"Never mind." Napoleon turned to McNulty. "Which cell did you put Kerry and Dr Morthley in?"

"The corner cell at the far end of the corridor."

"Which side of the corridor?"

"Toward the back of the building."

Napoleon relayed this information to Sotavento, who sounded even more unhappy than before. "Se♦or Solo, I do not think that I can rescue the prisoners from that location. Se♦or Forbes has discovered your escape and put guard all around the building, with a man at each end of the upper corridor. Undoubtedly a man of your skill could affect a rescue, but for a poor interpreter..."

"That's all right," Napoleon said. "Try to find out if the prisoners are likely to be moved in the near future, then meet us at the clearing by the river a mile east of the base in half an hour." He turned to Illya. "We're getting close enough so that we could be spotted by the helicopter on one of its flights. Better switch on the OTSMID."

Illya did so, and the bright moonlight around them was replaced by utter blackness. Illya came back and looked at the circular screen on the sonar. "Doesn't tell you much, does it?" he observed after a few seconds.

"Just watch the bottom blip," McNulty offered. "If it gets within ninety degrees of the upper one, you're too close to something, probably the ground. To find out where you are, of course, you have to shut the OTSMID off for a moment."

"Over this jungle, at night, I don't think 'moment' is quite the word," Napoleon said. "Just for the record does anyone know where we are now?"

"We have to be somewhere west of Thrush headquarters," Illya said. "Probably southwest, since Cerro Bueno lies a bit to the south. If we head north, we should cross that little river that flows past the Thrush base, and we could follow that."

"Good," Napoleon said. "The only remaining problem is to find out which way north is."

McNulty pointed to a compass mounted near the helm. "Turn the OTSMID off long enough for this to operate and we can get a heading. It's a little unhandy, but we didn't have time to get an inertial guidance system to install."

Illya followed McNulty's instructions and minutes later they were heading approximately north. They moved steadily, occasionally switching off the OTSMID so they could check the ground below and the compass. Eventually, Illya spotted the gleam of moonlight on water, and they turned toward the rising mountains in the east.

Now they had to switch the invisibility field off more frequently to avoid losing the slender thread of the stream, and with each brief foray into visibility, they nervously listened for the helicopter. Everyone, except McNulty, breathed a sigh of relief when a cluster of lights was spotted ahead.

"Thrush base in sight," Illya announce, hastily snapping on the OTSMID. "It's still at least a mile ahead; we'd better stay invisible until we pass it."

They moved silently along, with Illya checking one of his watches at intervals. Finally he rose, switched off the OTSMID, and hurried to a side window near the rear of the gondola. After a moment, he moved to the other side and exclaimed in satisfaction.

"We're fine," he announced, "but you'd better swing north about fifteen degrees or we'll miss the clearing. Incidentally," he added, "how are we going to pick up Sotavento?"

"Can't we just hover and lower the cable like Thrush did on Lake Michigan?" Napoleon asked.

"Not exactly. The dirigible was moored then, and it had more ballast. We lost a lot of weight when the paratroopers jumped. Now we're being held down by the elevators. The minute we stop moving forward, we start rising."

"Well, then we drift across the clearing as slowly as we can, dragging the cable, and Ishmael grabs it as it comes past."

Illya considered. "We can do that, I think, but I'd hate to snag that hook in a tree."

"You needn't worry," McNulty assured him. "The winch is very sturdy, and even at low speed the dirigible has enough inertia to tear a fair-sized tree out by the roots. Don't forget, it weighs fifty tons."

"We can do it, then," Illya decided.

Napoleon contacted Ishmael again and advised him of the plan. The local agent sounded dubious but reluctantly agreed to at least try.

A few minutes later, the dirigible coasted slowly over the clearing. The hook at the end of the cable splashed down in the middle of the stream, dragged across the bank, and headed for the first line of trees, less than two hundred feet away. Ishmael Gallinas y Sotavento valiantly dashed after it and overtook it about fifty feet short of the trees. He attached himself to it, leechlike, and closed his eyes. Illya engaged the winch and hauled him aboard.

Ishmael was still trembling and picking small leaves and branches from his clothing when he stepped into the control gondola ahead of Illya. He managed to smile weakly at Napoleon. "It is good to see you once again, se♦or."

Napoleon returned the smile. "Glad to have you aboard, Mr. Sotavento. I believe you and Mr. McNulty have met?"

The local agent stared. "But he—"

"Is at present working with us to avoid the wrath of Thrush. However, keep in mind that he is rather inventive and untrustworthy, so under no circumstances allow him near a weapon."

Sotavento nodded, and the four men settled down to a discussion of the possibilities of rescuing Kerry and Dr Morthley. The dirigible, its rudder locked in place, drifted in large, lazy, invisible circles.

* * *

Illya stood on the hook at the end of the winch cable, one of the retuned Thrush communicators and one of the normal ones tied around his neck. Three ropes were attached to the cable fifty feet above him in such a way that a solid pull on the ends that were looped about his chest would slide them down the cable until they were stopped by the hook. A hundred and fifty yards above him, Ishmael was cautiously operating the winch.

"Very slowly now," Illya spoke into the retuned communicator. "The hook is just starting to disappear. Just another couple of feet and I can duck down enough to see out."

As Ishmael lowered him further, the hook disappeared entirely into the floor of blackness beneath him, then his feet and legs up to his waist. "Stop!" he said, and the winch halted with only inches remaining between the edge of the field and the communicators hanging around his neck.

Illya squatted down on the hook, and the tops of the trees suddenly appeared, moving by at a leisurely pace less than a hundred yards below. Looking forward, he could just make out the lights of the Thrush base a

good half mile ahead. He watched for several seconds, then stood up with his head inside the field.

"To the left about ten degrees," he said into the communicator, and ducked back down. He could feel the cable sway slightly as McNulty shifted heading. Ahead, the cluster of lights grew larger and seemed to be dropping lower. "We've got the heading about right," he said as he stood up into the field again, "but bring it down a little. At this height, I'll need one of the parachutes myself."

Back outside the field, the trees rushed up at him with disconcerting suddenness, but before he hit the upper branches, the dirigible leveled off and he skimmed over the highest trees by twenty feet. "Hold it level," he said, sticking his head for a second back into the field.

As the Thrush base loomed nearer, Illya could make out the sound of the helicopter. Even at a quarter mile, its clattering roar began to drown out the quiet rumble of the dirigible's engines. *So much the better*, he thought; *the more distraction, the better chance we have*.

Now the headquarters building was approaching, sticking several yards above the surrounding trees. "Up about ten feet," Illya spoke into the communicator and immediately ducked back inside the field to watch the back wall of the building charge directly at him at ten miles an hour.

Again, he felt a shift as the elevators moved and the dirigible started to gain altitude. He waited until he cleared the last tree at the edge of the clearing and was swinging up and over the edge of the headquarters building, then stuck his head back into the field long enough to snap, "Now!" sharply into the communicator.

Illya dropped the half dozen feet from the hook to the roof. He hit lightly, partially restrained by the ropes around his chest and managed to retain his balance. The hook continued forward in a slightly rising trajectory for a second and the ropes tugged at him as their other ends slid jerkily as Ishmael reeled it off the winch at top speed.

The sound of the dirigible motors as their props seemed thunderous to Illya, but they were still not as loud as that of the helicopter as it clattered over the jungle on its way to pick up another load of the paratroopers.

As the hook came within reach, Illya grabbed it and began tugging it toward one corner of the roof. As he reached it and lay face down to feed the hook over the edge, a brilliant flash of light came from the jungle on the other side of the clearing. Ignoring the flash, he brought the hook level with a cell window four feet down the back wall of the building. He swung the hook against the bars, and called over the edge, "Kerry! Dr Morthley! Come to the window, quickly!"

In a matter of seconds, a pale face appeared at the bars and stared at the hook dangling inches away. "This is Illya," he explained in a stage whisper that carried over the sound of the receding helicopter and the growing tumult that had resulted from the first flare. "Get that hook in through the bars and loop it around them; then stick it back through and hook it to the cable. Hurry! We only have a few seconds!"

A second flare, brilliant red this time, went off. As Kerry's hand darted through the bars and pulled the hook through, the normal Thrush communicator around Illya's neck erupted into life.

"What's going on out there?" Forbes' voice crackled through. "Helicopter, can you see anything?"

Meanwhile, the sound of men shouting orders and pounding across the clearing toward the jungle was coming from in front of the headquarters building.

"A bunch of flares is all we can see," the helicopter was answering.

"Well, get back here, quick, whatever it is!" Forbes snapped "It's probably those two U.N.C.L.E. agents again—it has to be!"

The communicator fell silent as the hook reappeared through the bars and was fastened over the cable. "Now stand back from the wall." Illya told Kerry and Dr Morthley. "I'll be in to pick you up in a few seconds."

Without waiting for an acknowledgment, he raised himself from his prone position and moved back toward the center of the roof. The cable, where it disappeared into the field, was now moving back over the roof and rising slightly. The ropes had slid on the cable until they were attached to it a few feet above the point where it dropped over the edge of the roof.

The progress of the cable seemed agonizingly slow, and the sounds of activity below reached a new pitch as a third flare let go over the jungle. Illya was beginning to wonder if creating a diversion by having Napoleon fire the Very pistol into the jungle was going to be a help or hindrance.

Finally, the slack was taken up in the cable and it grew taut. There was a pause, much preliminary crackling and creaking, then a rending crash as the bars, a ten foot section of wall, and a small chunk of the roof tore loose and swung in a short arc toward the jungle in back of the building.

Simultaneously, the dirigible appeared overhead.

The instant the wall tore loose, Illya dashed forward, dragging the three ropes with him. Coming to the jagged edge of the hole, he stopped only long enough to assure himself that the floor of the cell had not been detached along with the wall, than grasped the edge of the hole and swung down into the cell.

Almost simultaneously, he spotted the two prisoners crouched in the far corner of the cell next to the door and a guard, his eyes wide and mouth agape, looking through the bars in the door. Before the guard could fully comprehend the situation and react properly, Illya had his U.N.C.L.E. Special in his hand. He snapped a quick shot the caught the guard in the shoulder just as he was attempting to bring his rifle into play. The rifle clattered to the floor and the guard stumbled back across the corridor away from the door.

Illya stuffed the gun in his belt and began struggling to get two of the ropes from around his chest. "Help me with these!" he snapped at Kerry and Dr Morthley. "Each of you get into one and be ready to make like Tarzan in about ten seconds."

He broke off as he could feel a tug on the ropes. The slack was gone and they were sliding the last ten feet toward the end of the cable.

"More cable!" he shouted into the communicator. "And reverse the props again! We'll swing right into the trees this way!"

"Helicopter!" Forbes' voice crackled from the Thrush communicator. "It's the dirigible! Open fire as soon as you get within range!"

Kerry and Dr Morthley were into their ropes. "Okay, we're hooked on," Illya shouted "Haul away!"

The slack disappeared rapidly from the ropes and the three of them were jerked roughly from the cell. Like a large pendulum, they swung toward the trees. The ropes cut viciously into their armpits.

Utter confusion reigned below. Another flare had just gone off and all Thrush troops were milling around in the clearing. No one seemed to realize what was happening except Forbes, who was back on the air shouting at the helicopter to hurry up.

As Illya, Kerry, and Dr Morthley were hauled above the level of the roof, Illya could see the helicopter approaching rapidly. It apparently spotted them as well, for it veered sharply and took a course directly for them.

In the light of another flare, Illya could see someone leaning out one side of the helicopter. Something that looked suspiciously like a sub-machinegun was clutched in one hand.

"There's someone hanging on a rope, being pulled up into the dirigible," the voice from the helicopter came sharply over the communicator.

"Get them!" Forbes snapped back. "I don't know how, but it must be Morthley, and we can't let him fall back into U.N.C.L.E. hands. Get him first, then try for the dirigible."

Illya looked around frantically. Invisibility would do them no good. They were still a hundred feet below where the field would extend if it were turned on. By the time they could be pulled into it, the helicopter would be on them.

He looked up. The helicopter would be coming directly under the front of the dirigible, he noticed suddenly. If he could remember the location of the ballast tanks correctly, and if there was any ballast left..."

"Napoleon!" he shouted into the communicator. "Get ready to drop all ballast from all tanks when I give you the word. And the instant you drop it, turn the OTSMID on and put on full power."

There was no reply, and Illya watched the helicopter. It was almost beneath the dirigible. A short burst from the sub-machinegun sent bullets hissing by over their heads.

"Now!" Illya shouted.

There was no immediate reaction. The helicopter bore down on them rapidly.

Then the dirigible disappeared.

"For want of a ballast..." Illya muttered and struggled to reach his gun. He had just pulled it free when a second burst of fire came at them from the helicopter.

They were getting his range.

Suddenly, something appeared a hundred feet above and slightly in front of the helicopter. It glittered in the light of another flare, then erupted into a cascade as it fell squarely on the helicopter, cutting short a third burst of sub-machinegun fire.

The helicopter jerked abruptly and began to wobble. Plowing suddenly into the falling mass of water ballast had been too much for the rotors. One snapped off and shot away and the helicopter shook violently from the resulting unbalance.

Through the spray, Illya could see the man with the gun shaken loose. He plummeted to earth, the helicopter spinning dizzily after him.

The last thing Illya saw as the invisibility field closed about him was the Thrush troops scattering frantically to avoid the debris.

* * *

Illya stood in the control gondola with Napoleon, Ishmael, Kerry, Dr Morthley, and McNulty. The engines were running wide open and the dirigible was moving visibly in the direction of Cerro Bueno. Napoleon was patched in to New York through Ishmael's retuned Thrush communicator and the Cerro Bueno U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

"Yes, Mr Waverly," he was saying. "The immediate threat to El Presidente is past and we have Morthley, Kerry and the OTSMID."

"Well done, Mr Solo," Waverly replied. "I knew my faith in you and Mr Kuryakin was not misplaced. You seem to have cleared up two of our more irritating problems in one stroke."

"There is one more thing," Napoleon said. "At the time of our first report from San Sebastian, you indicated a certain dissatisfaction with El Presidente. Thrush's planned use of the OTSMID and dirigible was really quite ingenious, and there's no reason why we can't give the legitimate rebels some help, once we get the Thrushes thoroughly weeded out."

There was a short silence from New York. "Well," Waverly's voice came after several seconds. "Well, well. I'll have to consider that, Mr Solo, when the time comes."

McNulty was staring and shaking his head when Napoleon signed off. "But you just risked your lives a half dozen times to prevent us from doing the same thing!" he burst out.

"You just don't understand, Arpad," Napoleon explained patiently. "It's all right for us to do it. We're the good guys."

McNulty turned wordlessly from Napoleon and picked up his parachute.

THE END

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Transcribed by kanders